Putin's Mercenaries 2013–24

The Wagner Group and other Russian PMCs

MARK GALEOTTI

ILLUSTRATED BY JOHNNY SHUMATE

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Series editors Martin Windrow & Nick Reynolds

CONTENTS

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND 4
Mercenaries in Muscovy ▪ From Learmonth to Lermontov ▪ Cossacks

THE PUTIN ERA 10
The concept of "Private Military Companies"

***WAGNER* IN THE DONBAS** 11
Yevgeny Prigozhin ▪ Dmitry "Wagner" Utkin ▪ Forming the "Orchestra"
Disciplining separatist warlords ▪ The battle for Debaltseve, 2015 ▪ GU connections, and structure
The Tsar's Wolves ▪ Personalities ▪ Typical composition of a Wagner Assault Detachment

THE SYRIAN ADVENTURE 21
The Slavonic Corps ▪ Enter *Wagner* ▪ Palmyra, 2016 & 2017 ▪ Making money
Shoigu vs *Wagner* ▪ Competition: PMCs "Redoubt" & "Patriot" ▪ Khasham: *Wagner* under US firepower

STRIKING GOLD IN AFRICA 31
Sudan, from 2017 ▪ Central African Republic, from 2018 ▪ Libya, from 2019
Mozambique, 2019–20 ▪ Mali, from 2021 ▪ Burkina Faso, from 2024
Interludes in Venezuela, 2019 & 2024

THE INVASION OF UKRAINE 41
Scraping the barrel ▪ The *Espaniola* Battalion ▪ *Wagner*'s return to the Donbas
"Project K": Convict recruitment ▪ 2022–23: Out of the shadows, into the meatgrinder ▪ *Rusych*
Bakhmut: Stalingrad in miniature ▪ *Akhmat* battalions ▪ A promise broken

THE MUTINY 51
Shoigu's revenge ▪ Taking Rostov ▪ The "March of Justice"

THE FUTURE 58
Putin's terms ▪ The last flight of RA-02795 ▪ The Expeditionary Volunteer Assault Corps
The African Corps

SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY 63

INDEX 64

Putin's Mercenaries 2013–24

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Mercenaries in Muscovy

When Vladimir Putin ordered the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, no one anticipated that within a few months he would be relying not on Russia's regular forces, but on mercenaries, to fight some of his toughest battles.

At some historical points since medieval times, most countries' armies have been partly or even wholly made up of mercenaries, and a few nations still field foreign-recruited units among their regulars (notable examples being Britain's Brigade of Gurkhas, and France's Foreign Legion). The Russian military is one of those which owes a particular historic debt to the tradition of foreign recruitment. In the 17th century the tsars were still having to rely mainly upon a static, venal, and often insubordinate corps of *Streltsy* musketeers. Otherwise they had only a relative handful of regiments that were largely locally raised, but heavily dependent on foreign mercenary commanders. Not only were they of variable quality, but this practice did not nurture the development of a home-grown officer corps.

Historically, the advantages that mercenaries offered were typically four-fold. Paid by a central government, they were unlikely to rally to ambitious regional leaders in risings against that government; they provided skills or abilities that the locals lacked; as more-or-less cohesive units of experienced fighting men, they could be deployed more quickly than locally raised recruits could be trained, equipped, and embodied; and finally, they offered a degree of deniability which allowed governments to take more chances than they might otherwise dare. To a degree, all these factors persist in Russian practice to the present day.

In late-medieval and early-modern Muscovy, Russian-born officers with professional education and attitudes were few, and from the late 15th century the Tsars hired foreign engineers, artillerymen, and other specialists. Humbler talents were also in demand, including those of disciplined foreign rank-and-file; by the time of his death Ivan IV the Terrible (r. 1547–84) was employing some 4,000–5,000 European mercenaries. For a year, he even had a small naval flotilla marauding in the Baltic under the leadership of a Danish privateer.

About a century later, when Tsar Peter I the Great (r. 1672–1725) found himself in conflict with both Sweden and the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (the great Northern military powers of that period), he too

OPPOSITE
Russia's modern employment of mercenary units followed its annexation of the Crimea from Ukraine in 2014, and its subsequent covert interventions in the Donbas territory of eastern Ukraine. These obliged the Kremlin to enforce obedience on a number of pro-Russian separatist militias in the disputed Donetsk and Lugansk regions. One of the most notorious for human rights abuses was Donetsk's *Sparta* Bn, whose commander Arsen "Motorola" Pavlov is photographed here in May 2015; a former military officer, he wears full modern equipment. Note the white field-recognition armband above the battalion's left sleeve patch: a red "arrowed M" motif set on horizontal black, yellow and white stripes. Pavlov would be assassinated, probably by *Wagner* Group mercenaries on the Kremlin's orders, in October 2016. (Photo Andrey Butko / Wikimedia Commons CC 3.0)

From Learmonth to Lermontov

One representative mercenary emigré was George Learmonth, a Scot from Fife who had signed up to fight for Poland in 1610. In 1613 he was in the ranks of a contingent of Scots and Irish who became trapped in the besieged fortress of Belaya. Like many of his comrades, when they surrendered after a month's stubborn resistance Learmonth switched his allegiance to his Russian captors, joining the regiment of his fellow Scotsman Jacob Shaw. He would later convert to the Orthodox faith and adopt the Russified name Yuri Andreyevich Lermont. As a *praporshchik* (essentially, a sergeant-major), in 1618 he fought against the Poles at the battle of Mozhaisk; he later rose to the rank of captain, and became an instructor. The family that he fathered in due course became the Lermontovs, who would include the great 19th-century author Mikhail Lermontov.

concentrated on hiring military experts from the West. His transformation of Russia's army began with a new Western-style imperial guard, and this would soon be followed by his foundation of "new style" line regiments of both conscripts and volunteers in 1699–1700. Their creation owed a great deal to foreign professionals, who commanded all eight of the original units. As the 18th century progressed, officers from Germany, Scandinavia, the Netherlands, England, Scotland, and Italy all accepted employment in Russia; many settled there as permanent migrants, and they and their descendants played key roles in the evolution of the Russian military.

Cossacks

A special "internal" case of mercenary service were the Cossacks, a society of mixed ethnic origins that emerged in the 15th century in the "Wild Fields," the much-disputed frontier marches between Poland-Lithuania, Muscovy, and the Crimean and Kazan khanates. The need to defend themselves in these borderlands produced a martial and fiercely independent society almost, though not entirely, beyond the reach of the Tsars. Over time, the

In 1574 a Cossack bandit turned mercenary, Yermak Timofeyevich, accepted a commission from the powerful Stroganov family to occupy territories along the Tobol and Irtysh rivers which Tsar Ivan IV the Terrible had granted them. This would start a war with the Khanate of Sibir, which also claimed these lands. With greater ruthlessness, discipline and firepower – as depicted in Vasily Surikov's painting "Yermak's Conquest of Siberia" – he quickly defeated his opponents, and began the centuries-long Russian expansion eastwards. (Public domain)

Viktor Vasnetsov's representation of 16th–17th-century *Streltsy*; the *berdysh* poleaxe was itself sometimes used as a rest for the heavy matchlock musket. (Public domain)

various *stanitsas* (fortified townships) cohered into loose federations fielding irregular light cavalry, notably the Zaporizhian and Don "hosts." The former had become a vassal state of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth by 1649, but the latter looked to Muscovy.

Although the Cossacks would eventually be integrated into the Russian state and armed forces, their ferocity, independence of spirit, and hardiness initially made them a key source of the mercenaries who spearheaded Tsarist expansion eastwards through Siberia and into the Far East. Their relative deniability was valuable even when they were operating under imperial charter. For instance, when Russia found itself inadvertently at war with Manchu China following a 17th-century expedition into the Amur River basin, negotiating the subsequent Treaty of Nerchinsk (1689) was eased by the fact that the intruders were Cossacks rather than regulars.

* * *

Through the 18th century Russia continued to make extensive use of hired foreign commanders and specialists, both on land and at sea (for instance, the American naval hero Capt John Paul Jones served Empress Catherine the Great against the Ottoman Turks in 1788). As the state became more developed, however, its dependence

An outstanding captain in America's fledgling navy during the Revolutionary War, but later underemployed, John Paul Jones accepted the Empress Catherine the Great's invitation to enter Russian service. Promoted to rear admiral and assigned to the Black Sea Fleet, he played a key role in victory over the Turks in 1788. The following year Jones was due to take command of the Baltic Fleet when a trumped-up scandal, probably due to local jealousy, led to his leaving Russia. His roles as both US captain and Russian admiral are commemorated by this plaque on a building on St. Petersburg's Nevsky Prospekt. (Public domain; photo Korte Brueckmann, Wikimedia CC 3.0)

November 1975: Carlos Fernández Gondín, 2iC of the Soviet Union's Cuban proxy military mission to Angola, confers with EPLA (People's Arm of Angolan Liberation) officers near Quifangondo. As Portugal's colonial forces left the country, the Cubans helped the EPLA to defend the capital, Luanda, against a combined rival FNLA, Zairian and South African force. (Photo Alfonso Naranjo Rosabal / Wikimedia Commons CC 4.0)

on foreigners diminished. The increasingly multi-ethnic empire provided new sources of able officers, from Baltic Germans to Georgian noblemen. The Cossacks remained a warrior community granted special privileges in return for their service, but were no longer able to pick and choose their missions and masters. While there were still some examples of complete mercenary units, these were usually employed for political rather than military reasons. For example, after the French Revolution of 1789, an emigré French royalist force under Louis Joseph de Bourbon, Prince of Condé (1736–1818), fought first with the Austrians, and then under the patronage of Tsar Paul I. In 1800, when Paul sought to mend relations with Napoleon's France, Condé's men transferred their loyalties to the British (evolving into the *Chasseurs Britanniques*, who served in the Mediterranean and the Peninsular War).

By 150 years later, following the Great Patriotic War (1941–45), the Soviet Union, now a nuclear-armed superpower, naturally had no need for mercenaries as such. It had its own empire in the "near abroad" – the Warsaw Pact – and subservient allies beyond. The forces of its vassal states were called upon to help fulfill specific roles, such as East German security specialists sent to Africa and the Middle East, and the proxy Cuban troops who would be deployed in Algeria, Angola, Congo, Ethiopia, and Syria.

A

THE DONBAS

(1) *Wagner* contractor, 2014

This Wagner Group mercenary is setting up a MON-50 directional mine ("claymore"). It may be to ambush Ukrainian forces, but there were also persistent and plausible suggestions that these contractors were used to take out troublesome separatist DNR and LNR militia commanders who failed to follow Moscow's line. As was common in the early years, he wears a mismatched uniform: a Barvikha VSR-93 jacket in Flora camouflage over a civilian vest and trousers, sports shoes produced by the army clothing company Voentorg, and dated army-surplus Type 2 Smerch web equipment. Wool caps would remain in widespread use. Note the armbands in the ribbon colors of the Order of St George, worn for field recognition.

(2) Dmitri Utkin, 2015

When Yevgeny Prigozhin was looking for a field commander he was lucky that Dmitry Utkin, a former *Spetsnaz* lieutenant-colonel with a continuing taste for action, was looking for a job. The man who gave *Wagner* its name (after his personal callsign) is here directing troops during the successful assault on Debaltseve in 2015. Reflecting his status, he wears the latest Russian Army-issue Ratnik battledress in EMR digital camouflage, although his black tactical rig and SPLAV gloves are privately acquired. The red armband was among rapid-recognition field signs used by Wagner forces at Debaltseve to avoid confusion with opponents wearing basically similar clothing and kit. He is armed with a short-barrelled AKS-74U assault carbine, and (obscured here) a holstered PM pistol.

(3) Volunteer, Russian Orthodox Army, 2014

A classic example of the kind of unit which blended local separatist militia, volunteers from Russia, and mercenaries was the Russian Orthodox Army (RPA), founded in early 2014 and later that year rolled into the DNR's Oplot Bde (5th Separate Infantry Brigade). On patrol in the outskirts of Donetsk, this soldier is wearing dated Russian Army TTsKO Butan camouflage of the sort usually issued to paratroopers and marines (whose blue-and-white *telnyashka* undershirt suggests that he is a veteran), but with the RPA's distinctive title and patch (**3a** & **3b**). Stenciled on his old steel SSh-68 helmet is the "Novorossian" flag. He is armed with an outdated 7.62mm AKM-47 with underslung GP-25 grenade launcher.

2
1
3
3a
РУССКАЯ ПРАВОСЛАВНАЯ АРМИЯ
РУССКАЯ ПРАВОСЛАВНАЯ АРМИЯ
3b
РУССКАЯ
ПРАВОСЛАВНАЯ
АРМИЯ

THE PUTIN ERA

The concept of "Private Military Companies"

A significant transformation of attitude would occur about a decade into the post-Soviet era, after the former KGB officer Vladimir Putin had come to power in the Russian Federation in 1999–2000. Putin was committed to restoring Russia to what he regarded as its rightful great-power status, but faced the challenge of doing so without the resources of the former Soviet Union (USSR).

Russia already had a substantial private security sector, including such internationally recognized companies as the Moran Security Group and RSB Security Group, which were involved in activities such as maritime protection and de-mining operations. However – although serving as a mercenary, or establishing such an organization, is banned under both Article 13.5 of the Russian Constitution and Article 359 of the Criminal Code – the Kremlin gradually embraced a new vision: that of a commercial company with close, albeit covert, state connections, which could operate as a deniable arm of Putin's regime abroad. This would not be a Private *Security* Company (PSC), but a Private *Military* Company (PMC, or ChVK in Russian), capable of operating in combat situations.

Serious discussion would only begin in 2010, when Eeben Barlow, founder of the South African PMC Executive Outcomes, gave a presentation at the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum. General Nikolai Makarov, then the Chief of the General Staff, was reportedly enthused by the notion that a suitable PMC could be a cost-efficient instrument for politico-military operations beyond Russia's immediate strategic neighbourhood. It was only in 2012, however – when Putin's belief that the West was behind a wave of anti-government protests set him on a much more confrontational path – that the idea gained real traction. It was time, Putin reasoned, to start pushing back against the West on a global level, and PMCs could be part of that campaign. When a parliamentarian asked him a clearly planted question about establishing PMCs in April 2012, Putin affected to be won over by the idea: "I think that it really is an instrument of realizing national interests without the direct participation of the government. You're absolutely right."

Contractors from the Moran Security Group conducting maritime security operations, armed with AKM-47s. Such Russian private security companies (PSCs) have been assiduously keeping their distance from the Private Military Company (PMC) sector, and from the war in Ukraine. (By permission,© Moran Security Group)

He was being disingenuous, however; a company had already been registered in Hong Kong earlier that year as the Kremlin's first venture into the world of mercenary organizations. As a limited experiment, this ill-starred Slavonic Corps was destined for operations in Syria, one of Russia's last allies, which was then embroiled in a vicious and complex civil war. Although the Corps' record

would be dismal (see below, "The Syrian Adventure"), nonetheless the Kremlin decided in 2013 to establish a rather more serious PMC; all it needed was the right man to front it up.

"Little green men" – Russian regular special forces – secure Simferopol airport during the February 2014 seizure of Crimea. That successful annexation came to change Moscow's plans for future use of its new PMC in many ways. (Photo Bulent Doruk / Anadolu Agency / via Getty Images)

WAGNER IN THE DONBAS

The figure Putin eventually selected to establish this new force was Yevgeny Prigozhin. Imprisoned on assault charges in the 1980s, Prigozhin – thuggish, ruthless, but also intelligent and entrepreneurial – began making his fortune during the anarchic "wild '90s" when Russia, under the careless rule of Boris Yeltsin, was still adapting to a primitive and almost lawless capitalism. A native of St. Petersburg, like Putin, he met the future president while the latter was still deputy mayor of that city. The KGB veteran was in charge of licensing gambling ventures, and Prigozhin wanted to establish a casino. He had a keen eye for a useful contact, and assiduously cultivated this rising political star. Consequently, during the early 2000s he would become the multi-millionaire owner of a range of companies largely providing services to the government – anything from feeding schoolchildren to cleaning offices, and, in due course, also to running the infamous online "troll farms" which spread disinformation on behalf of the Kremlin.

Yevgeny Prigozhin

Born in St. Petersburg – then still Leningrad – Prigozhin originally had ambitions to become a professional athlete as a cross-country skier, but when he failed to make the grade he turned to a life of crime. Arrested for aggravated robbery, he was sent to a high-security penal labor camp where, perversely, he thrived. Finding ways to combine his capacity for intimidation with an entrepreneurial talent, he would never really outgrow the brutal code of the Russian underworld. On his release in 1990 he found himself in a country in collapse, and during the following decade of feral "paleo-capitalism" he built a business empire from the gambling industry, groceries, and, famously, restaurants. In the process, he got to know St. Petersburg's deputy mayor Vladimir Putin, and when the latter became president, Prigozhin rose on his coattails. Jokingly called "Putin's chef," he was never a chef, and neither would he ever be a personal friend of Putin. Nonetheless, he became a multi-millionaire thanks to his capacity to identify and provide the kind of services that the Kremlin wanted handled at arm's length. These included building the social-media "troll farms" that demonized Russia's domestic political opposition, and later sought to meddle in the US elections of 2016.

Alexei Dyumin, a former bodyguard of President Putin, was in charge of the Russian Special Operations Command during the 2014 Crimean operation, and also seems to have been the man who introduced Yevgeny Prigozhin to Dmitry "Wagner" Utkin. He is portrayed here during his later spell as governor of Tula Region, wearing his Hero of the Russian Federation medal. (Press Service of the President of the Russian Federation / CC 4.0)

According to Prigozhin himself (in September 2022, when he was finally able to speak openly about the creation of his PMC), it was very much his initiative. He claimed that it was a patriotic response to Moscow's seizure of Crimea after the downfall of the pro-Moscow Ukrainian regime of Viktor Yanukovych in February 2014: "I, like many other businessmen… tried to recruit a group to go and protect Russians [in Crimea]. I flew to an old training ground and did it all myself: cleaned old weapons, sorted out [kit], and found specialists. On May 1, 2014, a group of patriots was born, which later acquired the name Wagner."

As so often, Prigozhin was inventing his own legend. In fact, the program had begun back in 2013, and credible accounts suggest that Prigozhin may well have been reluctant to add a mercenary company to his existing Concord Management Group business empire. At that time the Kremlin envisaged the PMC as most likely to be operating in the Middle East or Africa, and Prigozhin had no interests abroad – let alone any military experience. However, his entire business model depended on retaining the Kremlin's patronage by doing whatever the regime wanted doing, so ultimately it was an offer he could not refuse.

As to the search for a credible field commander, there Alexei Dyumin (a former presidential bodyguard, and in 2014 head of Russia's *Spetsnaz* military special forces) stepped in. Dyumin introduced Prigozhin to Dmitry Utkin, a cadaverous-looking recently retired army lieutenant-colonel who until 2013 had commanded the 2nd Spetsnaz Bde's 700th Detachment. Having reached a plateau in his military career, Utkin then resigned to work in private security; but he missed the excitement of action, and was just the kind of man Prigozhin was looking for. Utkin was, as a newspaper once coyly phrased it, "an aficionado of the aesthetics of the Third Reich" – in other

Dmitry "Wagner" Utkin

Born in 1970, Dmitry Vasilievich Utkin studied at a military school in Leningrad as a teenager and then went straight into the Soviet Army. He was quickly talent-spotted for the *Spetsnaz*, and served in both the First (1994–96) and Second (1999–2009) Chechen Wars. He acquired a reputation for self-confidence and ruthlessness, which led to his rising to command the 700th Detachment – but also for arrogance, which, along with his open fascination with Nazi Germany, ensured that he would rise no further. He was able to indulge his obsession fully once he became the *Wagner* Group's field commander: he would frequently sign papers with the SS runes, affected a World War II German field cap, and sometimes even greeted Prigozhin with "*Heil*, Petrovich!" (the latter's own codename within the unit). Utkin is believed to have been the man behind the brutal policy of "zeroing" – summary field execution of anyone refusing orders or fleeing battle – which was adopted during the latter stages of the Wagner Group's campaign in Ukraine in 2023.

Ukrainian protesters use teargas sprays and throw stones during clashes with *Berkut* riot police during a rally in Kyiv on November 24, 2013, in the violent lead-up to the popular ousting of Ukraine's corrupt Moscow-backed Yanukovych government in the so-called "Revolution of Dignity." (Photo Genya Savilov / AFP / via Getty Images)

words, he was a neo-Nazi, who even had lightning-flash runes tattooed high on his chest in imitation of SS collar patches. His Spetsnaz callsign had been "Wagner," after Hitler's favourite composer, and the new PMC took that as its name (later, it was sometimes known informally as the "Orchestra").

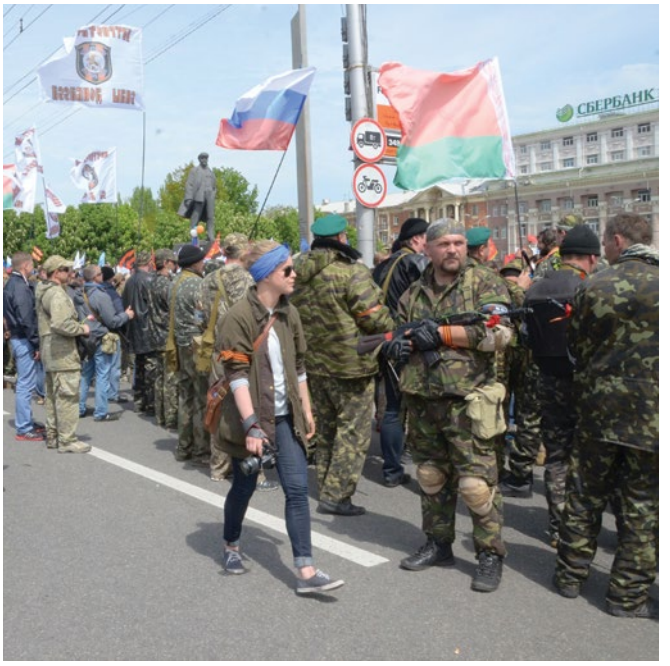
Forming the "Orchestra"

Utkin and Prigozhin moved quickly to begin recruiting fighters. Technically, the ChVK *Wagner* did not exist, and a series of commercial firms within Prigozhin's Concord Management Group were used as fronts. Utkin reached out to his own contacts, spreading a quiet word among various potential sources of recruits, from existing PSCs to *Spetsnaz*, airborne troops and naval infantry (marines) who were approaching the end of their contract service. (In 2013 the army's total strength was about 766,000, but of those only some 220,000 were professional volunteer *kontraktniki*, the rest being 12-month conscripts of limited military value.)

Three well-armed pro-Russian militiamen occupying government offices in Konstantinovka, north of Donetsk in the Donbas, during the chaotic period in 2014 known as the "Russian spring." (Photo Alex Lusenko / Anadolu Agency / via Getty Images)

This was also the time when, in the chaotic aftermath of Ukraine's "Revolution of Dignity," which had toppled the corrupt pro-Moscow Yanukovych government, Russia had just seized from Ukraine bases on the Crimean peninsula, as a prelude to full annexation.[1] Suddenly, a PMC which had initially been envisaged for deployment in the "global South" was destined for Ukraine instead. There were reports that Wagner was active during the takeover of Crimea, but it seems more likely that Prigozhin and Utkin went there only to recruit amongst the

1 See *Putin Takes Crimea 2014*, Osprey Raid 59 (2023).



Mercenaries of the Vostok Bn in a heterogenous mix of uniform items at the May 9, 2014, Victory Day celebrations in Donetsk, while this formerly Chechen unit was still in the process of "Ukrainianization" with local recruits from the Donbas. Note a couple of men wearing green berets, and several displaying narrow armbands of the orange-and-black Order of St. George ribbon. (Photo Andrey Butko / Wikipedia Commons CC BY-SA 3.0)

local thugs and militias, as well as from volunteer units from Russia (ranging from Afghan war veterans to members of motorcycle gangs) which flocked there to support the seizure. Prigozhin and Utkin only signed a formal agreement codifying their respective roles as "director" and "commander" on May 1, 2014, which suggests that the PMC was still in a formative stage before that date.

In fact, at this time they could afford to be highly selective, largely hiring former special forces, airborne and marine veterans. They were offering some 200,000 roubles a month – ten times what a normal *kontraktnik* volunteer in the regular military could earn – and could turn away nine out of every ten prospective recruits. By late spring 2014 what we will hereafter simply call "Wagner" comprised an estimated 300 soldiers, equivalent to no more than perhaps a couple of companies, with a temporary base at Vesyoloye in southern Russia.

They were hurriedly outfitted with a mix of hand-me-down clothing and equipment from the regular military and commercially-acquired kit; their uniforms were often miscellaneous, and at first they had no standard insignia or rank badges. Initially the army only wanted to supply them only with dated 7.62mm AKM assault rifles, of which there were substantial reserve stocks, but thanks to the intercession of GU military intelligence (still widely known by its old acronym, GRU), they were then issued more modern 5.45mm AK-74s. They also received a limited number of light support weapons, including PKM and PKP machineguns, RPG-7V rocket launchers, and some 82mm 2B14 *Podnos* mortars. Given that they were mounted in "soft-skin" vehicles, the mercenaries were not equipped for front-line combat, but this was hardly an issue yet. What the GU had in mind for them at first was a rather more shadowy and specialized role.

Following the annexation of Crimea, a messy anti-Kyiv insurgency emerged in the predominantly Russian-speaking regions of southeastern Ukraine, especially the industrial zone known as the Donbas. This had always been a bastion of Yanukovych's Party of the Regions, where many locals were either opposed to the 2014 revolution, or at least concerned by what they felt was a tipping of the balance from the Russian- to the Ukrainian-speaking populations. At that time few of the former yet argued for outright secession, but there was a movement in favor of greater autonomy for the Donbas within Ukraine.

These sentiments were encouraged and inflamed by Russian nationalists who began to involve themselves in the region's politics. Although the Kremlin would soon take over this rebel movement, and turn a civil war into an undeclared foreign intervention, initially Putin's regime was ambivalent, unsure whether to support the budding insurgency or to cut it loose. In

the ensuing chaos a bizarre miscellany of anti-Kyiv militias emerged, from local self-defense groups to neo-Nazi gangs, and from organized criminals to quasi-political warlords hoping to be rewarded by Russia.

As Moscow became more invested in the conflict, it looked not only for deniable ways of supporting the rebels against the Kyiv government forces and their own militias (many of these in fact being drawn from Russian-speaking but loyalist Ukrainians), but also for means of asserting the Kremlin's authority over the Donbas would-be separatists. Again, the GU took the lead. In May 2014 a GU-led "volunteer" force called the Vostok ("East") Battalion rolled into central Donetsk, the capital of what would become one of two rebel pseudo-states (the Donetsk and Lugansk People's Republics). The battalion seized the main administration building from the Donbas rebels in a show of force, to demonstrate that Moscow could not be ignored.

A Cossack fighting with the pro-Russian rebels in Donetsk, eastern Ukraine; he wears a traditional black astrakhan cap, apparently over shoulder-length hair, and what seems to be the same camouflage jacket as illustrated in our Plate H3 on page 61. The top cover of his belt-fed PK general-purpose machinegun is raised here. (Photo Andrey Butko / via Getty Images)

The original Vostok Bn had been a unit of former Chechen rebels who had joined the local warlord Sulim Yamadayev in defecting to the Russian side in 1999 at the start of the Second Chechen War. Run by what was then still the GRU, it was disbanded in 2009 as a result of the Moscow-installed Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov's feud with the Yamadayev family. However, in April 2014 the GU essentially re-formed it, bolstering it with mercenaries from other North Caucasus regions, to intervene in the Donbas on Moscow's behalf. It was quickly "Ukrainianized," replacing the Chechens and others with local recruits – some attracted by the cause, others just by the pay – including a number of former *Berkut* riot police. Alexander Khodakovsky, a defector from Ukraine's Security Service (the SBU), was installed as its commander. Vostok became a significant unit within the pro-Moscow rebel forces, growing to a strength of around 1,000, but it remained under the overall control of the GU rather than of any Donbas militia.

Disciplining separatist warlords

Many of the individual militia warlords who emerged during this scrappy and ruthless struggle were too erratic or wilful for Moscow's comfort. By summer 2014 it had been decided to take over the rebel movement as a means of putting pressure on Kyiv. The Kremlin did not want to show its hand overtly, but needed to purge those militia commanders who seemed not to grasp or accept this new order of affairs. From autumn 2014 through 2015 there was a series of killings which were typically blamed on Ukrainian government forces – though no evidence was ever forthcoming – but which were widely assumed to be Wagner's work.

January 2015, for example, saw the assassination of Alexander "Batman" Bednov, commander of the Batman Rapid Response Group in the forces of the self-proclaimed Lugansk People's Republic (LNR). He was returning to his base when he ran into an ambush, his minibus riddled with machinegun fire which killed him and his six heavily-armed bodyguards. After some initial

A burnt-out KamAZ-43269 *Vystrel* (BPM-97) MRAP, one of the vehicles issued to Wagner from FSB Border Troops stocks, and which the mercenaries tried to ensure they did not leave on the Donbas battlefield as evidence of Russian state support. (Photo Nikolaev1789 / Wikimedia Commons BY-SA CC 4.0)

confusion, the LNR prosecutor's office stated that a firefight had erupted after its officers tried to arrest Bednov, but corroborating first-hand testimony was not forthcoming. In May 2015 Alexei Mozgovoi, commander of the LNR's Prizrak ("Ghost") Brigade, was also ambushed: a roadside bomb detonated beside his motorcade, which was then raked by a lethal crossfire. In December 2015 it was the turn of Pavel "Batya" Dremov, whose Cossack militia had carved out a virtual fiefdom in the town of Stakhanov in the LNR, but this did not protect him from a car bomb. In October 2016 Arsen "Motorola" Pavlov, whose Sparta Bn of the Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) forces was implicated in a series of war crimes, was killed by a bomb placed in the lift of his apartment building.

Although the truth behind these and many other killings is still hard to confirm, the belief among the Donbas rebels was certainly that PMC Wagner was behind all or most of them. The group also played a limited role in the actual fighting, providing the ragtag militias with some specialized assets such as sniper teams. For example, on June 14, 2014, an Il-76MD transport aircraft of Ukraine's 25th Transport Aviation Bde was shot down as it tried to land 40 paratroopers from the 25th Separate Dnipropetrovsk Airborne Bde at Lugansk international airport, killing all on board. The Ukrainian SBU was later able to demonstrate that those responsible had been Wagner contractors acting on Utkin's personal orders, using two 9K38 *Igla* (NATO codename SA-18 Grouse) man-portable missile launchers. Subsequently, however, Wagner would play a much more direct and extensive role.

The battle for Debaltseve, 2015

Although never openly admitted, from the first it was clear that Wagner was being directed by the GU. Subsequent interviews, as well as intercepted communications released by the SBU, demonstrate that the unit's "curator" or supervisor was the senior GU officer LtGen Oleg Ivannikov, who went by the pseudonym "Andrei Ivanovich" and the callsign "Orion."

Between 2004 and 2006, as "Andrei Laptev," this officer had chaired the security council of the Republic of South Ossetia, a Moscow-backed but unrecognized breakaway region of Georgia, and was subsequently its minister of defense and emergencies until 2008.[2] Clearly regarded as an expert in managing such separatist pseudo-states, Ivannikov was deployed to the LNR in 2014–15, with authority over both Utkin and LNR Defense Minister Igor Plotnitsky. Meanwhile, MajGen Yevgeny Nikoforov, chief of staff of Russia's 20th Combined Arms Army, appears to have been the "quartermaster," ensuring a steady flow of weapons, equipment, and ammunition to the mercenaries.

2 See Elite 250, *Russia's Five-Day War: The Invasion of Georgia, August 2008*.

An aerial view of the headquarters of the Main Intelligence Directorate of the General Staff (the GU, formerly GRU), on Grizodubovoy Street in northwest Moscow. (Contributor / via Getty Images)

Ivannikov played a key role in introducing Wagner into a direct combat role in the Donbas. The city of Debaltseve in the Donetsk Region had initially fallen to separatists, but was recaptured by Kyiv government forces in July 2014, thus forming a strategic salient dividing the DNR from the LNR. In January 2015, rebel forces including the Prizrak and Oplot Bdes and the so-called Cossack National Guard launched a combined attack to retake the city, supported by Russian regulars, Spetsnaz, and 122mm *Grad* MRLs from the 232nd Rocket Artillery Brigade.

It soon became clear that the rebel forces lacked the mass and firepower to dislodge the well-entrenched Ukrainian defenders, and after about a week Russian troops began taking a more prominent role. There was a marked increase in the artillery fire battering the Ukrainian forces, while Ivannikov rotated in Wagner fighters to support the rebels. By this time the mercenaries numbered more than 500, and had begun to be issued with some tanks and other armor. This included BPM-97 *Vystrel* MRAPs originally supplied to the FSB Border Troops, and MT-LB armored carriers retrofitted with twin ZU-23 23mm AA guns which could be used for direct ground-fire support.

Several hundred Wagner mercenaries supported by Russian artillery turned the tide of battle, but it was hard fighting. For all his aggressive confidence, Utkin's nerves began to fray as casualties mounted, and at one point he called his chief of staff, Andrei Troshev, begging him to "get me out of here. My own ****ing guys are going to shoot me soon." In fact, the Vystrels proved to be as much a liability as an asset. So concerned was Utkin not to leave on the field evidence of Kremlin backing – since the Border Troops were then the Vystrel's only official users – that when two were disabled he charged the deputy commander of Wagner's 1st Recon-Assault Co to give priority to retrieving them above recovering their own casualties.

By the beginning of February 2015 Debaltseve was all but encircled, as Ukrainian civilians and soldiers alike tried to flee the cauldron down the so-called "road of life" – the M3 highway leading northwest to Ukrainian government-held Bakhmut. On February 12 a renewed offensive from both DNR and LNR territory pushed back the Ukrainian lines, while attempts to organize ceasefires and the safe evacuation of civilians largely came to

Russian military *Spetsnaz* in training. By opening a base in summer 2015 at Molkino, close to that of the 10th Spetsnaz Bde, the Wagner Group acquired a new channel for recruiting special forces soldiers who were coming to the end of their regular enlistments. (Russian Ministry of Defense CC 4.0)

nothing. By the 17th the rebels were inside the city itself, and the next day the government forces hurriedly began to withdraw in a convoy that came under withering direct and artillery fire. By February 20 the city was firmly in rebel hands; Wagner had lost perhaps 21 dead, as well as two of the precious tanks they had been issued.

GU connections, and structure

This would be the last major engagement before the ceasefire associated with the largely ineffective "Minsk II peace accords," which technically had come into effect on February 5. For the next few years a low-intensity conflict would grumble on, at some times marked only by sporadic sniper and artillery duels, at others flaring into bouts of localized fighting.[3] As Russian regular troops (who were generally not based in the DNR or LNR, but would "surge" battalion tactical groups when needed) and the separatist forces both became more accustomed to combat, Wagner was not necessarily needed. By means

3 See Elite 228, *Armies of Russia's War in Ukraine (2014–18)*.

The Tsar's Wolves

During the civil wars which ripped Yugoslavia apart in the 1990s, many Russians went to fight in support of Serbian militants in Bosnia and elsewhere.[4] Some went as individuals, others banded together in often short-lived units, of which one of the most stable was the Tsar's Wolves or 2nd Russian Volunteer Detachment (RDO-2). Scarcely more than a platoon in size, it acquired a disproportionate reputation, which grew when many of its members went to join ethnic Russian rebels in Transnistria in 1992. The unit was then essentially disbanded, but its name was revived in 2014 when Russian nationalists sought to assemble mercenary units to help the Donbas separatists. Claiming to be motivated by a desire to restore the glory of the Russian Empire, in fact they served more as technical advisors and a training cadre than as a front-line force. This made them useful to Moscow as a way of deniably inserting regular army advisors into the conflict, and the unit continued to operate through to the February 2022 invasion of Ukraine.

In November 2022 a Russian nationalist politician and former head of the Rosatom nuclear power corporation, Dmitry Rogozin, announced himself as the Wolves' new leader. Rather than a field commander, Rogozin appears to have been no more than its "curator," while the unit itself increasingly turned to testing and developing new weapons and systems in the field, from drones to electronic warfare suites. Rogozin himself did begin to serve a three-month stint at the front (not least in order to rehabilitate himself in Putin's eyes, after he had fallen from favor because of Rosatom's underperformance), but this was cut short in December 2022 when he was wounded by artillery fire.

4 See Elite 146, *Yugoslav Wars (2): Bosnia, Kosovo & Macedonia 1992–2001*.

A member of the 3rd Co of the DNR's extremist Viking Bn using an AGS-17 automatic 30mm grenade launcher. Manufactured in Ukraine as well as Russia, this weapon was favored for its versatility in the scrappy small-unit actions that characterized much of the undeclared war in the Donbas, and has since seen widespread use in Ukraine. It is fed by 29-round drum magazines, is fitted with both basic "iron" sights and a mortar-type sight, and can also take a rail-mounted 'scope. (Photo Gennadiy Dubovoy / Wikimedia Commons CC B-Y)

of the spate of assassinations (see above) which became more numerous after Minsk II, Moscow took advantage of the reduced tempo of the fighting to tighten its grip. There were other – if less capable – mercenary forces that could fill gaps, such as the "Tsar's Wolves" (see panel), while the GU was already considering new uses for Wagner.

By summer 2015 Wagner had expanded to almost 1,000 effectives, and now acquired its own base at Molkino in the southern Krasnodar Region. Tellingly, this was co-located with an existing facility of the 10th Spetsnaz Bde, who manned the outer perimeter; after being checked, incoming drivers then turned left for the army base, or right for the mercenary camp. Initially little more than a collection of tents and trailers behind razor wire, by the end of 2015 this had sprouted proper barracks, administration buildings, training grounds, and firing ranges.

Wagner was also being equipped more generously as its relationship with the GU became more formalized; from 2015 its "curator" was the GU's deputy head, LtGen Vladimir Alexeyev. Within the GU there tend to be sharp divisions between the *Agentura* ("Agency"), the foreign-intelligence officers typically working undercover as defense attachés in overseas embassies; the analysts, beavering away in their secure offices; and the hard men, formerly of the Spetsnaz, who provide the "trigger-pullers." Alexeyev was very much one of these last, being in overall control of the GU's "executive forces" including Unit 29155, its sabotage and assassination element. Subsequently Alexeyev's relationship with Prigozhin would become strained, but his early appreciation of the value of mercenary forces proved crucial to Wagner's initial rise.

As Wagner expanded, it developed and strengthened its command and organization structures. Initially it described itself as a "company tactical group" (RTG) – a term used by the Russian military for an ad hoc subunit, based around a mechanized or tank company but augmented with additional assets specific to its particular mission, such as reconnaissance, artillery, or air-defense elements. This RTG was in turn divided into reconnaissance-assault elements (RShR) each about 100 strong, which would later be retitled as assault detachments (ShO). The RTG later began to be known instead as a battalion, or even a regiment, and by 2016 the ShOs themselves had

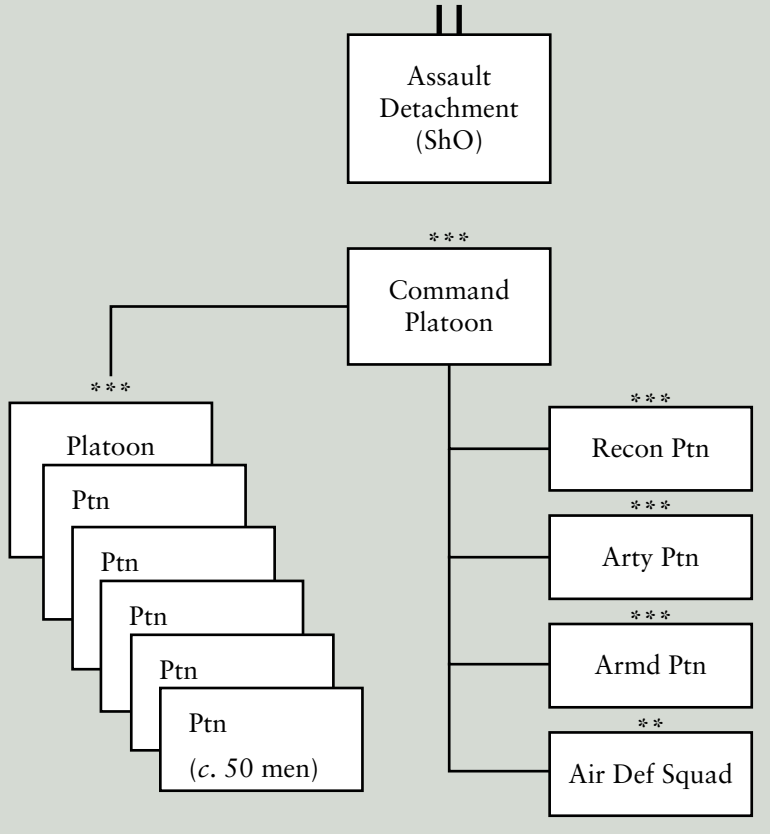
expanded into units of around 300–500 men each. Much as in the early Bolshevik Red Army, Wagner officers had roles and commands but not a formal rank structure; an officer might be, for example, "commander of the 2nd ShO," but not a captain or major.

Personalities

Nonetheless, even as the force later expanded, there was always a clear hierarchy. Utkin was an ever-present figure, and members of his staff also became increasingly significant in their own right. Utkin had brought in several veterans of the Slavonic Corps in Syria, including Vladimir "Mekhan" Titov and the Cossack Sergei "Degtyar" Degtaryov, who would end up as the heads of an ShO and a sniper section, respectively. Other early recruits who would become legendary were the Chechen War veteran (and ex-convict) Alexander "Ratibor" Kuznetsov, who headed the 1st RShR (later 1st ShO), and Andrei "Brodyaga" ("Vagabond") Bogatov, who would lead the 4th ShO in Syria. Meanwhile, the decorated ex-Police special forces officer

Typical composition of a Wagner Assault Detachment

This is an idealized representation of an ShO in late 2022, but broadly it applied from 2017 onward. Size and composition varied widely depending on date and mission; other support elements might include Engineer, Medical, Helicopter, Drone, Maintenance, etc.



Andrei Troshev – callsign "Sedoy" ("Greyhair") – was recruited as Wagner's chief of staff, directly managing both logistics and the unit's own nascent security service.

As Wagner expanded in size and began to operate internationally it would need more logistical and managerial specialists to support and complement the "trigger-pullers." Valery "Rover" Chekalov, for example, was a former naval officer who ended up managing a series of Prigozhin's front companies which ensured that Wagner's operations in Africa were fully supported, including procuring MRAPs and other armored vehicles. These would be a necessity when Wagner headed to new battlefields far from Russia's borders.

THE SYRIAN ADVENTURE

Civil war exploded in Syria in mid-2011, after "Arab Spring" protests against President Bashar al-Assad's authoritarian regime were brutally suppressed. As already mentioned, a ramshackle Russian mercenary force called the Slavonic Corps was originally deployed in 2013 to try to provide some support for Assad's regime, but it was quickly withdrawn (see panel). In Moscow, with hindsight, it was generally recognized that this force had been dramatically undermanned and under-equipped for a mission which turned out to be combat operations rather than simply site security. With characteristic spite, the regime prosecuted the two men behind the Slavonic Corps even though they had established it at the state's behest, but the notion of using mercenaries in Syria was not abandoned.

By 2015, despite the support of Iranian-backed Hezbollah militias and supplies of Russian arms, the Assad regime appeared to be on the verge of collapse. Most of the country was in the hands of various rebel groups, ranging from the Western-backed Free Syrian Army (FSA) to the extreme

The Slavonic Corps

Technically registered in Hong Kong to get around Russia's laws against mercenary activity, the Slavonic Corps was established in January 2012, apparently on behalf of the FSB (Federal Security Service). By 2013 the prime movers, Vadim Gusev and Yevgeny Sidorov, were openly recruiting mercenaries to guard oil and gas facilities in Syria's Deir ez-Zor region. That summer, two companies totaling some 260 contractors deployed first to Damascus and then to Latakia, technically being employed by the Syrian energy ministry. It soon became clear that things were not as promised; for example, instead of the T-72 tanks they had expected they simply received civilian buses onto which metal plates had been crudely welded. On October 18 they were ordered to head northeast to Al-Sukhnah in Deir ez-Zor province to relieve a Syrian Army unit – with the unwelcome news that they were expected not simply to guard facilities, but to recapture them from the enemy. On their way they were attacked by a much larger force of jihadist rebels. They received minimal support from a single Syrian fighter aircraft and a self-propelled gun, and were lucky to be able to withdraw under cover of a sandstorm, suffering only six casualties. Nonetheless, that was enough to reduce them to demoralized near-mutiny, and the Corps was withdrawn from Syria in November.

Initially Russia deployed Naval Infantry in support of its intervention in the Syrian civil war, but their role was static security rather than maneuver operations. For combat versatility, the unacknowledged services of the Wagner Group were needed. (Russian Ministry of Defense / Wikimedia Commons CC 4.0)

jihadist Islamic State (ISIS or ISIL), and the government had lost effective control even over parts of Damascus itself. Moscow decided to intervene – in part to prop up its last Middle Eastern ally and retain a harbor foothold in the Mediterranean, and in part as a gesture of defiance to a US government that was trying to isolate Russia following its incursions into the Donbas.

The original plan was that the Russians would confine themselves to providing airpower and long-range artillery support for the beleaguered Syrian Army. This they began, with unexpected efficiency. In September 2015 the first 28 aircraft arrived at their new facilities at Khmeimim airbase, near Latakia in western Syria: 4 advanced Su-30SM fighters, 12 Su-25SM ground-attack aircraft, and 12 Su-24M2 tactical bombers, alongside a contingent of Mi-24PN and Mi-35M attack helicopters. By the end of the month these were already launching airstrikes, and in October warships of Russia's Caspian Flotilla also began firing *Kalibr* cruise missiles at Syrian targets through Iranian and Iraqi airspace.

The Command Post of the Group of Forces in Syria (KPGVS) at Khmeimim soon increased in size and scope, as it became clear that the Syrian Army was in even worse shape than feared, and would need to be stiffened by anything up to a division-strength force of ground troops. By November 2015, while Russian Navy ships stood off their small Syrian supply and repair base at Tartus, marines from the 810th Guards Naval Infantry Bde were being deployed to Khmeimim, with the latest T-90 tanks and S-400 air-defense systems. Their mission was essentially force protection, however, since there was no public enthusiasm in Russia for sending troops

B

SYRIA

(1) Contractor, Slavonic Corps; Latakia, November 2013

Russia's first venture into mercenary power-projection in Syria, this 260-strong "legion" proved to be ill-prepared for combat. Many of its recruits were poorly trained and equipped, like this disconsolate soldier killing time before being evacuated from Latakia after surviving an attack on his convoy. He wears a random collection of army surplus and civilian pseudo-military kit: the so-called *panamka* hat widely worn during the Soviet war in Afghanistan in the 1980s; a civilian "hoodie" sweatshirt; commercially-acquired camouflage trousers; and M-1-style webbing. Although the Corps had been promised top-of-the-line equipment, he is armed with a venerable 7.62mm AK-47 rifle.

(2) *Wagner* sniper; "first" Palmyra, 2016

Wagner provided much more effective support for the Syrian government forces. This sniper is wearing an army-issue desert-camouflage field cap and the unmistakable Gorka-3 tactical suit, under partial SSO Smerch webbing equipment. Wagner allowed its fighters considerable latitude over details; note his imported 5.11 shooting gloves, and the shoulder patch (**2a**). The latter was an informal insignia worn by snipers of the FSB Border Troops, suggesting his former service. He is armed with a 7.62mm SVDS, an upgraded, folding-stock version of the old Dragunov SVD sniper rifle, fitted with a variable-power 1P88-4 telescopic sight, and crudely camouflage-painted to match the environment.

(3) *Wagner* officer; "first" Palmyra, 2016

In combat, Wagner officers rarely wore visible rank insignia. This mature veteran's status is indicated by the fact that he has been issued the 6B45 tactical vest only recently distributed to the regular military, of which around a hundred sets were released to Wagner in 2015. Bundled around his neck is a local *keffiyeh* in muted green over brown. He is using an R-187 *Azart* P-1 radio to call in a Russian airstrike during the last stages of the hard-fought first battle for Palmyra. His SPLAV battledress is in the rare Ataka camouflage originally designed for Interior Troops, and his right-sleeve shoulder patch is as (**3a**). His 5.45mm AK-74M rifle has been upgraded with the *Obves* KM-AK kit, with a new vertical foregrip, muzzle brake, sound suppressor, *Perst*-3 laser sight, and sling.

(4) Medal for survivors of battle of Khasham, February 7, 2018

3a

2a

4

2

1

3

A Sukhoi Su-24M2 bomber comes in for a parachute-braked landing at Khmeimim, Syria, a couple of months after the Air and Aerospace Defense forces were amalgamated under the title Russian Aerospace Forces in August 2015. In service since 1974, initially with first-generation advanced navigation / attack avionics, the Su-24 ceased production in 1993; its M2 version has significantly updated cockpit systems and weapons capability. (Russian Ministry of Defense / Wikimedia Commons CC 4.0)

to fight and die for Damascus. The Kremlin therefore resorted to deploying mercenaries, who would be deniable not only to the outside world but to the Russian people themselves.

Enter *Wagner*

The Syrian situation had become ever more complex with the emergence of the puritanical so-called Islamic State "caliphate" (ISIS / ISIL). Notorious for its brutality, from 2015 this extreme Salafi jihadist offshoot from Al-Qaeda had extended its reach across parts of Iraq and eastern Syria, fighting both the Western coalition in Iraq and the Assad regime over the border.

Since late September 2015 small numbers of Wagner fighters had been in Syria, both performing guard duties and spying out the lay of the land. In November and December more substantial numbers of mercenaries began to arrive, flown in on Syrian commercial flights or Russian military transports. By the end of the year there were over 500 contractors in-country, largely quartered in Latakia and Homs to train Syrian troops. In early 2016 these were increased to fully 1,500 men, including not only four front-line ShOs but also an air-defense company, an artillery battery, and armored elements. They conducted some small-scale operations alongside elite Syrian Tiger Forces units, but their first serious engagement was in the March 2016 battle for Palmyra (actually, mainly for Tadmur town, close to the ruins of the ancient city).[5] At that time held by Islamic State, Palmyra was both symbolically and strategically important; the KPGVS was determined that the operation be successful, in hope that this might restore some of the Syrian Army's lost confidence.

Palmyra, 2016 & 2017

To this end, both regular Spetsnaz and Wagner forces were committed fairly liberally. In the early stages reconnaissance platoons called down artillery and airstrikes, which began on March 9, 2016. Three days later, Syrian troops attacked villages outside the city, again with heavy Russian air and artillery support. Having taken these flanking positions, including hills commanding Tadmur, the Syrians then had to contend with an Islamic State counterattack during a sandstorm. This was repelled, but the soldiers' morale looked shaky enough to prompt the deployment of Syrian marines

5 Created late in 2013 by Syria's Air Intelligence Directorate, the Tiger Forces (later redesignated 25th Special Mission Forces Div) totaled in 2016 *c*.4,000 infantry plus largely Alawite militia reserves, with an integral artillery regiment and armored element. See online paper "The Tiger Forces" by Gregory Waters, Middle East Institute (http//www.mei.edu), consulted Dec 30, 2024.

and Lebanese Hezbollah fighters to stiffen them, while the Russians stepped up their air activity to more than 20 sorties per day. Meanwhile, Wagner fighters were conducting patrols close to the rebel lines to forestall any more surprise attacks.

By March 23 government forces were closing in on the city, but the fighting in the outskirts was hard, and their confidence was dwindling again. Consequently Wagner fighters were redeployed, this time as a spearhead to break through Palmyra's outer defenses and create a breech through which government troops could advance. As one mercenary later bitterly observed: "From my assault company, 18 died. After us, those chickens from Assad's army followed and finished the job, but we did most of the work." This might be a slight but understandable exaggeration, but it is true that thanks to Wagner's unsung efforts the government forces rallied and were able to push into the city, and by March 27 Palmyra and Tadmur were in Assad's hands. It was an undoubted triumph, and to a considerable extent it was thanks to Wagner (and, it has to be said, regular Spetsnaz). Despite their losses – "Brodyaga" Bogatov, leading his 4th ShO, lost his left arm to friendly fire in a Russian airstrike, and some 30 mercenaries died – Wagner would get no public thanks, though its value had become clear.

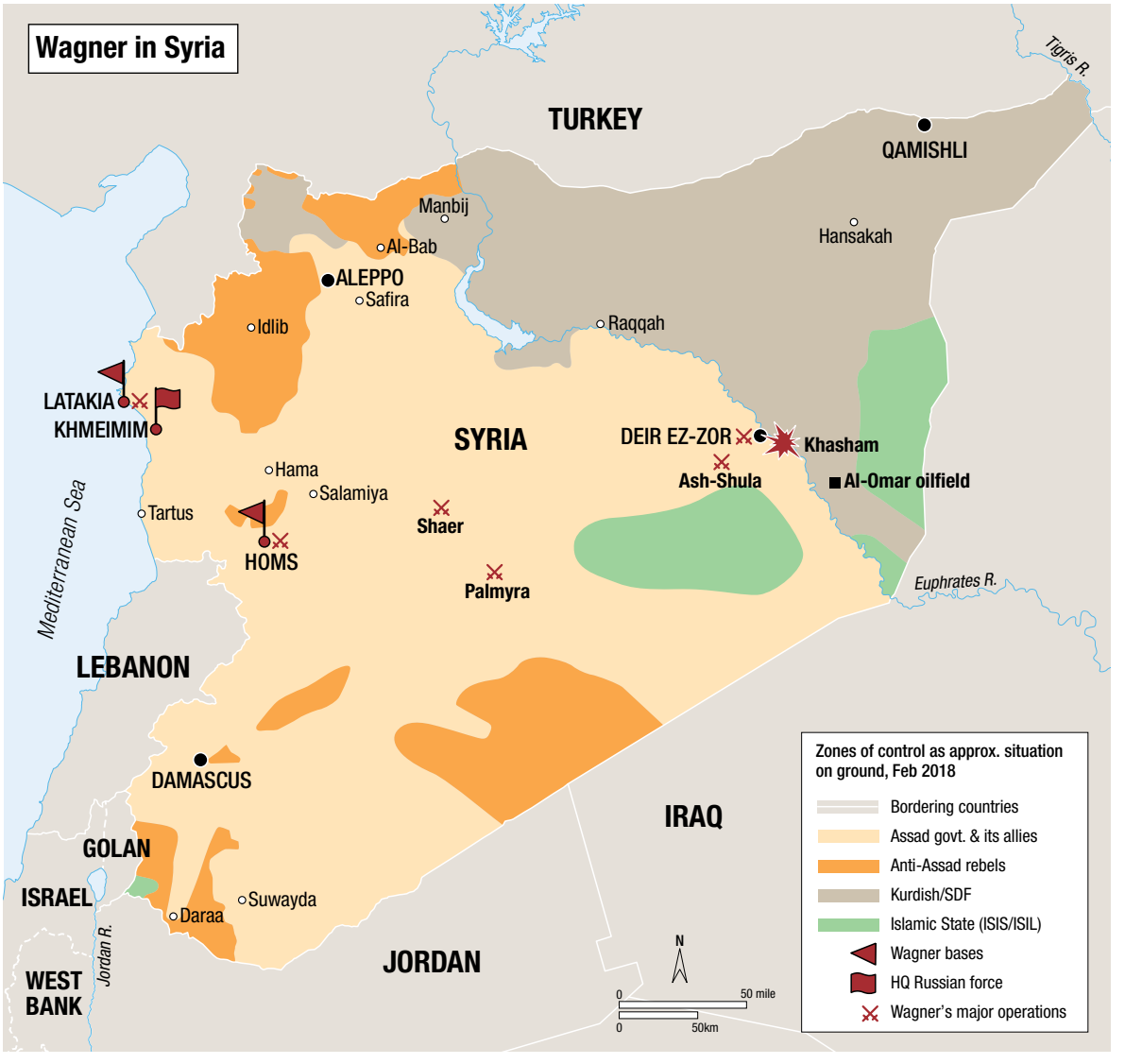
The Russians played a crucial role in delivering airstrikes in support of ground operations by the Assad regime's forces during their long battle to retake the city of Aleppo in 2016. While Wagner was not committed to major ground operations there, it did deploy forward observer teams to provide air-targeting guidance. (Photo Ahmed Muhammed Ali / Anadolu Agency / via Getty Images)

Nine months after its first recapture, Palmyra fell once again; Islamic State managed to retake the city in December 2016, and in January 2017 another response had to be launched. Wagner again played a major role, while also liberating the Hayyan and Jihar gas fields in the process. It was a mark of the new importance to Prigozhin of economic targets (see below, "Making money") that while Kuznetsov's 1st ShO would be crucial in closing the encirclement of Tadmur, Utkin personally led the operation to take Hayyan. All told, some 60 Wagner contractors died in the second recapture of Palmyra.

While Wagner's service in Syria was still not being publicized, a measure of recognition was now granted to some of its senior officers. Throughout his regular military career Utkin had received only one significant decoration, the Order of Courage. By the end of 2016 he had accumulated another three, including being named, along with Troshev and Bogatov, a Hero of the Russian Federation. He had also been personally presented to Putin in the Kremlin at the Day of Heroes of the Fatherland reception on December 9, 2016. Nonetheless, even at this date – and despite the fact that an ordinary mercenary was being paid more than a regular colonel – among Wagner as a whole the lack of public recognition rankled, perhaps beginning to lay the fuse that would eventually detonate the 2023 mutiny.

Making money

Although apparently uninvolved in the Assad government's tightening of the siege around Aleppo in 2016, between the two battles of Palmyra the



mercenaries were involved in a range of patrols and local actions as well as continuing their training mission. One result was that between October 2015 and August 2016 Wagner had reportedly cost the Russian state budget US $170 million. It was also receiving modern equipment that would otherwise have gone to the army, including T-90 tanks and BTR-82A APCs. As the war continued to turn in Damascus's favor, with government forces becoming increasingly competent and confident, the Russian Defense Ministry would consequently become less willing to spend so much on what one officer serving at the KPGVS would call these "overpaid, arrogant military cast-offs." Even by mid-2016 there was a sense in Moscow that Prigozhin ought to be finding new ways of defraying the cost of his mercenaries.

His response, in June 2016, was the establishment within his sprawling business empire of EvroPolis LLC. By 2017 this company would be well on its way to becoming central to Wagner's operations in Syria, while representing the first step in a business model that would see its deployments spreading across Africa and even beyond. By January 2017 Wagner was

negotiating a deal with Damascus that would bring EvroPolis – and thus Prigozhin – 25 percent of the revenue from any oil and gas fields and facilities that Wagner liberated from the rebels. Technically, Wagner itself (invisibly embedded in the Concord Management Group) would not receive direct payment, but other entities within Prigozhin's empire would accrue the revenue to fund its combat operations.

At one level, this way of generating profit by long-term exploitation of natural resources, rather than by seeking up-front cash payments from often-impoverished regimes, was highly attractive. However, at the same time it would seem to justify the Defense Ministry's scaling back of its own support for Wagner in Syria. But while the Air Force, for example, was now charging to ferry mercenaries to and from that theater, Prighozhin's improving cashflow would soon allow Wagner to splash out, in both bonuses and new kit. Their AK-74M rifles increasingly sported modifications, from personalized stocks to advanced sights. Their body armor and night vision gear were no longer Russian Army surplus, but the most modern versions available to the Spetsnaz or imported from the West.

In Syria, Wagner maintained a mine-clearing subunit of sappers within its 3rd ShO assault detachment, photographed here on the outskirts of Palmyra. (Russian Ministry of Defense CC 4.0)

Reflecting the highly mobile nature of this war, often fought by long-range patrols making desert raids, Wagner also spent money on building up its vehicle park, from Ural *Chekan* MRAPs to BRDM-2 scout cars bought from Syrian "mothballed" stocks. While a rather dated Soviet design, the latter wheeled reconnaissance vehicle lent itself to upgrades, with three distinct versions emerging. Some up-gunned the turret with a 30mm AGS-17 automatic grenade launcher and a 12.7mm NSV heavy machinegun, while adding slat armor around the hull to protect against shaped-charge

The fighting in Syria was characterized by both close-quarter street-fighting in urban centers and long-distance desert hit-and-run raids. For the latter role Wagner acquired vehicles similar to this improvized "technical" photographed in use by the Western-backed Free Syrian Army, which mounts a Russian 23mm ZU-23 autocannon. (Qasioun News Agency / Wikimedia Commons CC 3.0)

As well as fixed-wing aircraft, the Russian assets in Syria also included Mi-35M gunships (an evolution of the Mi-24), both for strike missions and troop transport. On a number of occasions in 2015–16 Wagner personnel were transported or supported in action by Russian Army Aviation Mi-35s. (Russian Ministry of Defense CC 4.0)

warheads. A second version was very similar, but mounted the same weapons in an open cupola to give the crew better situational awareness. Finally, some replaced the turret altogether with a remotely-controlled 23mm ZU-23 autocannon.

Meanwhile, operational attention was turning toward Deir ez-Zor, a city on the Euphrates River some 280 miles northeast of Damascus, which had been more-or-less surrounded by ISIL jihadists since July 2014. Islamic State had made gains early in 2017 while Assad's forces were focusing on Palmyra, and they retained the initiative into the summer. However, after government forces had achieved successes in central Syria, in August 2017 they were in a position to launch a sustained offensive against the rebels surrounding Deir ez-Zor, with the help of Russian airstrikes and Wagner troops on the ground. The siege was eventually broken on September 9, although fighting to clear the city entirely would continue until November 17.

This was a victory won largely by Syrian government forces, and it confirmed a view held in both the KPGVS and Moscow: that the considerable sums of money being spent on Wagner were no longer justified. After two frustrating years, the original strategy – of a war fought on the ground by Damascus and its allies and auxiliaries, supported by Russian artillery and aircraft – now seemed viable at last.

Shoigu vs *Wagner*

This strategic decision was almost certainly partly informed by the resentment felt by many regulars toward the mercenaries – not least, among senior defense figures in Moscow, over their inability to get their own cut of the money flowing into Prigozhin's coffers. Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu was adamant that the mercenaries should not receive public recognition, affirming after the seizure of Palmyra that "*gopniks*" – a Russian term conveying the sense of a trashy criminal underclass – "cannot go down in history." Prigozhin rounded furiously on Shoigu, who started downscaling Wagner's role in the war.

Increasingly, the mercenaries would be denied the best kit, and expected to pay for whatever support they received. Indeed, it was suggested that the Defense Ministry no longer needed Wagner in Syria at all and should stop paying it to operate there, relying instead upon new PMCs that it was helping to develop (see panel). It would not help that ColGen Surovikin – commander of the Group of Forces in Syria, and a friend to both Prigozhin and Wagner (he was even made an "honorary member" in 2017) – would be rotated out of post that December. He would be replaced by LtGen Alexander Zhuravlyov, who was much more skeptical of the mercenaries' value, and was soon alienated by Prigozhin's blustering attempts to convince him otherwise.

Competition: PMCs "Redoubt" & "Patriot"

In 2003 veterans from the 45th Separate Guards Spetsnaz Bde, the Russian paratroopers' own special forces unit, formed a PSC called *Antiterror-Oryol* (being based in the city of Oryol), which in 2008 became *Redut-Antiterror* (*Redut* meaning "Redoubt"). Thanks to its close connection with the 45th Bde – its HQ was co-located with the brigade's base at Kubinka, west of Moscow – *Redut* also maintained regular contacts with the Defense Ministry.

In 2017 Stroytransgaz, a major operator of oil and gas facilities, began looking to strengthen the security of its assets in Syria. The Defense Ministry encouraged it to consider Redut (which by then numbered Yevgeny Sidorov, one of the prime movers behind the Slavonic Corps, among its senior staff). Given that the key figure behind Stroytransgaz was Gennady Timchenko – a close friend of Putin, and one of Russia's richest men – there was suddenly a great deal of money available to build up this rival to Wagner, and under tighter GU control. By 2018 Redut (sometimes going under the name *Shchit*, "Shield") was providing heavily armed static security and convoy escorts in Syria. It was clear that even while the GU's Gen Alexeyev was still "curating" Wagner, he saw Redut as a more capable and reliable alternative; he even headhunted Anatoly Karazy, Wagner's chief of intelligence, to head it.

In 2018 the GU had set up yet another PMC named "Patriot" as an even more elite unit, able to attract the pick of potential recruits by higher salaries and the opportunity to sign up for shorter tours.

Prigozhin's dilemma was that while Defense Minister Shoigu was no longer willing to bankroll Wagner sufficiently to meet its needs, nevertheless the Kremlin had decided that his mercenary force (which by this stage had expanded to over 5,000 contractors, analogous to a reinforced brigade) would still be a useful asset on the world stage. Prigozhin thus had no choice but to maintain it in being, and if he could not find new ways of paying its considerable upkeep costs then they would have to come out of Concord's (and thus his own) financial reserves. However, the EvroPolis contract seemed to offer a lifeline, since in January 2018 the provisional agreement with Damascus was upgraded to a binding deal. Wagner started looking for opportunities to exploit it – and set off on the road to disaster at Khasham.

Khasham: *Wagner* under US firepower

Given that the emergence of ISIS / ISIL had created a "three-sided" war, the Euphrates River in eastern Syria had been accepted as a boundary line between the Russian-backed Assad government forces in the west, and in the east the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), a Kurdish-led coalition of militias fighting both Damascus and Islamic State. However, with the EvroPolis deal in mind, Wagner had an eye on the potentially lucrative Al-Tabiyeh gas field on the other side of the river.

Wagner's role in Syria was not publicized by the Russian media, being ignored in favor of more publicly reassuring reports featuring Military Police, as here, engaged in media-friendly aid and "peace-keeping" missions. Only formed in 2012, the branch of this MP senior lieutenant (three stars on the shoulder-strap slide) is identified by the patch and "*Voyennaya politsiya*" on his sleeve brassard. (Russian Ministry of Defense CC 4.0)

The northeastern city of Deir ez-Zor was the site of difficult street fighting by Syrian government and Wagner forces before it was recaptured in late 2017. (Photo Simon Evans / Wikimedia Commons CC 2.0)

Late on February 7, 2018, a mixed force of Syrian regulars, militia and Wagner contractors some 500 strong crossed the Euphrates to attack an SDF base at Khasham. With artillery cover and T-72 and T-55 tanks, they would quickly have overrun the lightly-armed defenders had not a small contingent of US troops also been present. These called for fire support, and the US reached out to their liaison at the KPGVS to confirm if Russian forces were involved. On Gen Zhuravlyov's orders, they were told that there were "no Russian service personnel" there – which was technically true, but disingenuous at best.

The Americans took this opportunity to unleash a massive demonstration of their firepower. AC-130 gunships pounded the attackers with 40mm guns, MQ-9 Reaper drones and AH-64 Apache gunships let loose volleys of Hellfire missiles, and M142 HIMARS MRLs showered the attackers with submunitions. In just four hours the attack was shattered and routed. Although some reports suggested that Wagner's casualties were as high as 300, the real figure was likely far lower. Nonetheless, it was a shocking blow, and a lesson on the dangers of "freelancing" in such a complex theater of war.

Prigozhin was furious. He claimed that the operation had been cleared by both Damascus and the presidential administration in Moscow, and that his men had been promised air cover by the KPGVS. This seems to have been at least an exaggeration, but in any case the Defense Ministry flatly rejected his claims, and when Prigozhin tried to browbeat Shoigu at a later meeting the minister shrugged him off. Prigozhin's feud with Shoigu, a subtle and dangerous veteran of Russian politics, now began to obsess him (and would ultimately consume him).

For now, though, it was clear that Wagner had few remaining opportunities in Syria. By mid-2018 most of its contractors had been withdrawn, although small numbers would remain in guard roles, and also providing trainers and specialists under direct contract with Damascus rather than the KPGVS. Largely, however, Wagner was bound for new opportunities in a new theater: Africa. If Prigozhin could not cover its costs in Syria, then he would find new customers eager to make use of his particular range of services.

Mercenaries unfortunate enough to have been deployed at Khasham in February 2018 reported that among the most terrifying weapons with which they were targeted by US forces was the M142 High Mobility Artillery Rocket System (HIMARS). Its M30, M30A1, and M31 GMLRS rockets are lethally accurate at ranges of over 50 miles, and include unitary warheads, others carrying hundreds of explosive submunitions, and a variant which detonates to spread some 180,000 tungsten-steel shrapnel balls over an area of half a square mile. More recently the US has supplied Ukraine with limited numbers of this weapon system. (Public domain)

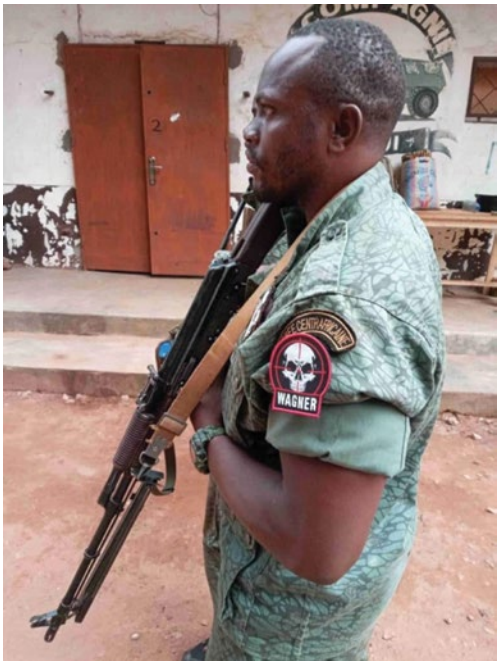
STRIKING GOLD IN AFRICA

From 2017, presumably seeing the writing on the wall, the Concord Management Group suddenly started establishing a range of shell companies (e.g. M-Invest and Meroe Gold) which would provide the financial basis for a whole new range of Wagner operations in Africa. Moscow did not really have a coherent strategy in Africa, but this was a time when the West seemed to be neglecting the continent, and France, in particular, was scaling down its commitments to its francophone former colonies. Consequently, a range of authoritarian governments were seeking to secure themselves, not just with bodyguards and counter-insurgency fighters, but also with what the Russians called "political technologists" (experts in the political dark arts, from spreading disinformation to rigging elections).

Moscow was happy to see Russians take advantage of these opportunities, not least because it helped boost the country's image as a rising geopolitical player once more. The consummate deal-maker Prigozhin was ready to take advantage of this; he could offer not just Wagner, but his infamous "troll farms," his spin-doctors, his willingness to pay kickbacks to members of the regimes hiring him, and the option of being paid through gold, diamond, and similar shadowy concessions rather than in immediate cash.

He found a good number of potential customers for his package of what might be termed "authoritarian-regime survival services." Some, like Madagascar and Zimbabwe, were only interested in the political technologists, but for most of them Wagner was at least part of the mix. There was no separate "Africa division" within the PMC; Prigozhin personally handled many of the negotiations, but Col Konstantin "Mazay" Pikalov emerged as his overall coordinator of African operations. Pikalov had served in a top-secret Russian Army detachment known as Unit 99795, ostensibly responsible for research and testing, but his later career at the heart of Moscow's meddling in the politics of Bosnia-Herzegovina in 2014, and then in the Donbas, led many to suspect that he had a GU background which fitted him for this new role.

Wagner's first missions in Africa tended to be banal, simply providing security for government members and other VIPs. Here, some of its contractors protect a motorcade of the Central African Republic's President Touadéra in the capital, Bangui. (Public domain)



A soldier of the Central African Republic's *Force Armée Centrafricaine* (FACA) wearing beneath its shoulder title a variant Wagner Group patch. This was displayed not only by the mercenaries in the CAR but also by local troops whom they had trained. (Photo Anselme Mbata / CorbeauNews CC 4.0)

Sudan, from 2017

Sudan's former president Omar al-Bashir had long been a Russian ally, and during a visit to Moscow in November 2017 he signed a series of deals which included gold-mining concessions to Prigozhin's company M-Invest. Around 100 Wagner contractors soon arrived, largely in the southeast of the country, to carry out force-support missions (in 2022 they even began training Sudanese forces in parachute-landing operations). During popular protests in 2019 they were on hand in case they were needed to help suppress unrest, even while Wagner was already entering into secret negotiations with al-Bashir's rival, Gen Abdel Fattah al-Burhan. While Moscow was dismayed when al-Burhan seized power in a coup in April 2019, Prigozhin seems to have welcomed it. There was certainly no immediate change in Wagner's deployment of 500 contractors from the 1st and 3rd ShOs under "Ratibor" Kuznetsov and Boris "Zombie" Nizhevenok, although these would be scaled down to around 100 by April 2023.

When fighting broke out between the army and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF) – a separate force largely recruited from *Janjaweed* Arab nomad militias by Sudan's National Intelligence & Security Service – it emerged that Wagner had been working with them, too. It was allegedly employed to transfer to the RSF armored vehicles and helicopters bought by the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and to train locals in their use. Given Wagner's backing for the RSF, Ukraine declared itself for al-Burhan, on the principle that "my enemy's enemy is my friend." At the start of 2024 Ukraine claimed that it was providing his government with drones, and that HUR (military intelligence) special forces were present on the ground to hunt the Wagner contractors, although at the time of writing this had not been independently verified.

C

AFRICA

(1) *Wagner* bodyguard; Central African Republic, 2018

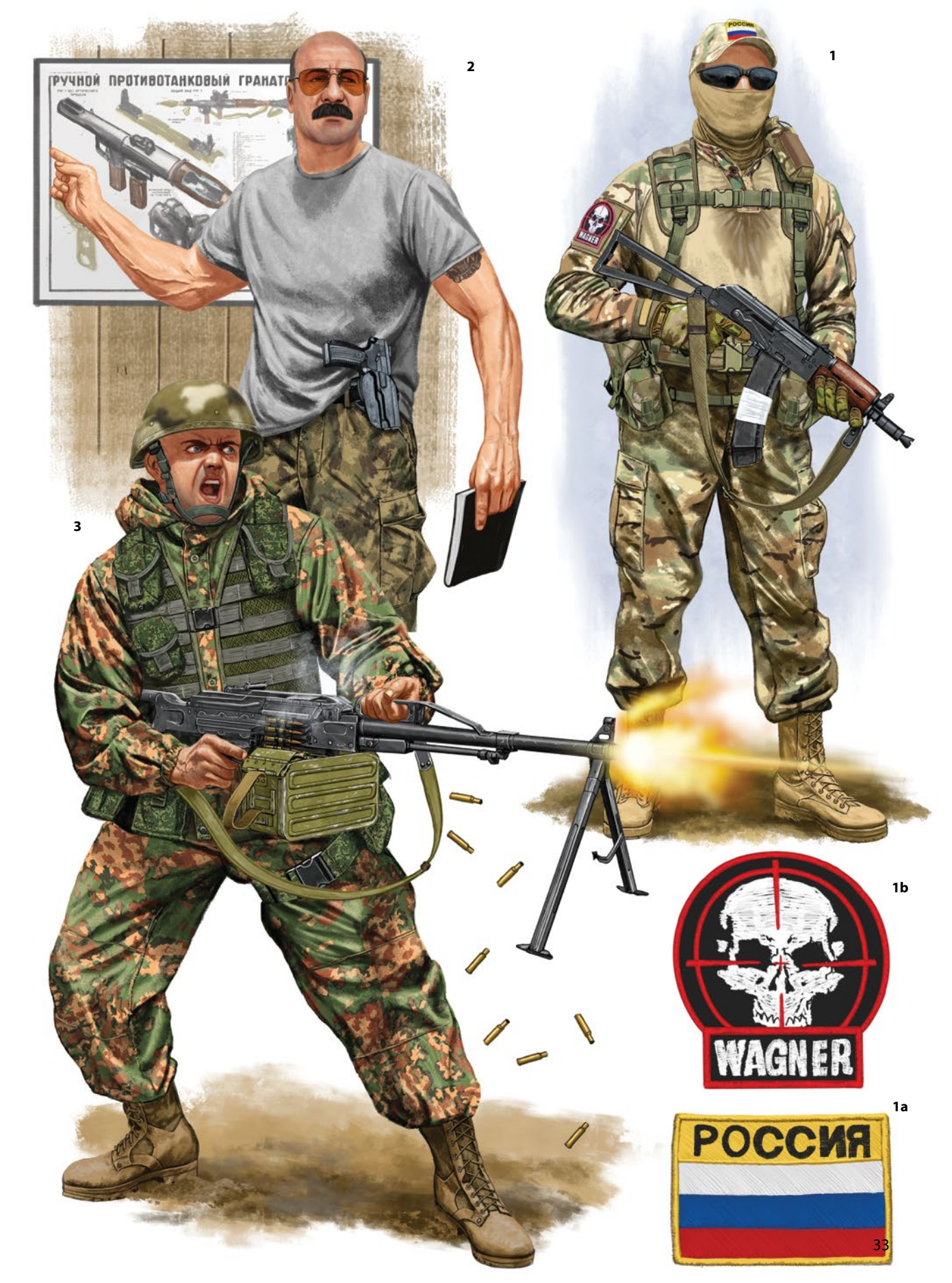
This Wagner contractor is part of a VIP security detail in the CAR, and is a composite of men photographed with an anonymous black Toyota Land Cruiser on the streets of Bangui. His AKS-74U assault carbine is handier than the more usual AK-74 rifle for use from a vehicle and possible close-quarter combat in the security role, and is fitted with two taped-together magazines for rapid reloading. His tan-and-camouflage uniform, the "wicking" torso designed for coolness when worn under body armor, was quite common for mercenaries deployed to Africa, and he has a typical mix of Russian Army surplus equipment (e.g. the Smersh A webbing rig), and commercial kit (e.g. his gloves and cap), the latter with a tricolor "Russia" patch **(1a)**. His Wagner shoulder patch **(1b)** is of an unofficial design that was regularly used within the contingent in the CAR during 2018–19.

(2) *Wagner* trainer; Sudan, 2018

One of Wagner's fundamental missions in Africa has been providing training. Here, an instructor runs a class of recruits for the Rapid Support Force (led by Gen Mohamed Dagalo, aka "Hemedti") through the basics of the RPG-7 antitank weapon – a dated system, but one still widely used in Africa. Although not on a combat mission, he nonetheless carries a holstered PYa Yarygin pistol, just in case. The tattoo partly visible on his arm is one sported by some veterans of the Russian 106th Guards Airborne Div; Wagner sought to recruit extensively from former paratroopers and marines.

(3) *Wagner* machine-gunner; Mali, 2022

Wagner has a mixed record in Africa; it has achieved some notable successes, as in the CAR, but in Mali its progress has been patchier. Here, an unnerved mercenary empties his PKP Pecheneg general-purpose machinegun at Tuareg or jihadist rebels. (Firing a machinegun from the hip works better in Hollywood films than in real life, and will very quickly exhaust the hundred-round belt in the box fitted as a magazine.) His 6B7-1M ballistic helmet has been crudely camouflage-painted, probably by its user. He is wearing Partizan-pattern camouflage battledress under a 6Sh116 fine-mesh load vest in a contrasting scheme; the desert boots, originally issued to regular troops in Syria, imply that he had served a tour there.


РУЧНОЙ ПРОТИВОТАНКОВЫЙ ГРАНАТ
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1
3
1b
WAGNER
1a
РОССИЯ

Central African Republic, from 2018

The Central African Republic (CAR) has been wracked by political violence and civil wars ever since acquiring independence from France in 1960, but the election to the presidency in 2016 of Faustin-Archange Touadéra was hoped by many to be a step toward stability. However, a variety of rebel groups, primarily in the east, continued to defy his government, taking advantage of the withdrawal of French forces in 2016, and by 2018 they controlled more than two-thirds of the country. In 2018 the first Wagner contractors arrived, officially to protect strategic mines, as well as to provide a praetorian guard for Touadéra himself. Valery Zakharov, a Wagner staffer with a background in the Russian Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR), was even installed in the capital, Bangui, as Touadéra's national security advisor.

The Russian Defense Ministry's PMC Patriot soon took over responsibility for protecting the president, and the Wagner force, expanded to some 1,400 men (again, from the 1st and 3rd ShOs) switched missions, at first training government forces and then assisting them in operations against the rebels. When three Russian journalists arrived in the CAR in July 2018 to investigate allegations of excessive mercenary violence, they were ambushed and killed by unknown assailants. It is certain that Prighozin's agent "Mazay" Pikalov had ordered that they be followed and investigated.

At the end of 2020 rebels captured the city of Bambari, which triggered a major government response. Along with FACA forces, Rwandan mercenaries, and Russian-led UN peacekeepers, Wagner helped recapture Bambari. The offensive was continued eastwards, pushing the rebels back from their previous positions in the central CAR and as far as the town of Bria. Wagner took losses, including the shooting down of a Gazelle helicopter they were using, but they maintained their momentum. The Russians acted as the vanguard, taking the fight to the rebels while government troops were meant to secure the territory they had liberated. Operations continued in fits and starts; in May 2021, Wagner fighters even chased rebels over the border with Chad, creating a diplomatic incident when they killed six Chadian border guards in the process. By the middle of 2021 Wagner officers were even granted command over some of the best of the accompanying government troops, such as the FACA's Western-trained *Bataillon d'Infanterie Territoriale 7*.

Despite their often ruthless methods, Wagner's mercenaries have won support from many quarters in Africa, because they have achieved greater success against murderous and pillaging insurgents than have the various local forces. Here citizens of Bangui stage a demonstration of support which – while certainly organized by the CAR government – also tapped into some genuine feeling. The banner reads "Russia is Wagner. We love Russia and we love Wagner." (Photo Barbara Debout / AFP / via Getty Images)

By the end of 2021 the rebels had essentially abandoned any attempt to fight Wagner on its own terms and reverted to classic guerrilla tactics. They continued to inflict casualties, but could not prevent the fall of more of their strongholds, including the eastern town of Nzacko in 2022. By 2023 Wagner was able to pivot its operations and focus on interdiction of rebel movement and supply lines across the borders with Chad to the north and Cameroon to the east. Little as the West likes to admit it, given the mercenaries' brutal methods, Wagner's CAR

operation is generally considered to have been successful. It turned the situation around for the government, and in the process garnered for Wagner a powerful political stake, plus economic assets ranging from gold, diamond, and logging concessions to a profitable brewery in Bangui.

Part of Prigozhin's offer to African regimes was not just mercenary soldiers, but also "political technologists." One of the most important of these fixers was Maxim Shugaley, who was detained in Tripoli, Libya, in May 2019 on espionage charges by the US-backed Government of National Accord. He was eventually released at the end of 2020. (Photo Elena Chernyshova / Bloomberg / via Getty Images)

Libya, from 2019

Since the overthrow and killing of Col Muammar Gaddafi in 2011, Libya has spent more years in civil war than at peace. The Second Libyan Civil War (2014–20) was largely a struggle between the UN-recognized Government of National Accord (GNA) based at Tripoli in the west, and the rival House of Representatives at Tobruk in the east, while simultaneously both were aligned against Al-Qaeda and Islamic State affiliates. Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar, commander of the eastern forces (the so-called Libyan National Army, LNA), became increasingly allied with Russia. In November 2018, when Haftar met Shoigu in Moscow, Prigozhin was also present. In 2019 Wagner contractors began to arrive in Libya, in part to provide crews for AA and EW systems that Russia was supplying to the LNA, and in part to carry out support missions, flying reconnaissance drones and providing long-range artillery fires.

The first detachment of 300 men was expanded to 1,400 by the end of 2019. It played an important and growing role in the LNA's campaign to subdue the ethnic Tebu nomads of southern Libya, whose capital, Sabha, and also Libya's largest oilfield at Sharara, it had taken by February 2020. While it was at first assumed that Wagner would be funded through an oil concession, it emerged that the bulk of its costs were actually being met by the government of the United Arab Emirates, which supported Khaftar and was happy to hire Russian mercenaries – and to let Moscow take any blame for their actions.

Wagner Group mercenaries during field operations in the CAR. Their personnel carrier is a so-called "Wagner wagon," the *Chekan* MRAP vehicle built on a Ural-432007 truck chassis; see also Plate D1, page 37. (CorbeauNews Centrafrique / Wikimedia Commons CC 4.0)

The Mi-8AMTSh (Mi-17) helicopter was a crucial asset for Wagner in Africa, able to function in the armed assault, troop-carrier, supply, or casevac roles. (Jameswasswa / Wikimedia Commons CC 4.0)

Wagner was then involved in the LNA's attempt to take and hold Tripoli, the GNA's capital. Again, its role was primarily in support of LNA troops, but this time it also deployed forward observer and sniper teams, while pilots hired by the UAE flew Chinese-made CJ-D1 Wing Loong strike drones out of Al-Khadim airbase in the east. As it happened, Turkish support for the GNA (bought at the price of favorable maritime oil and gas deals) turned the tide, especially after the arrival of 12 *Bayraktar* TB2 strike drones of their own, as well as EW systems able to jam the radars of the Russian *Pantsir* S-1 AA vehicles bought by the UAE for Haftar's forces and largely operated by Wagner crews. A ceasefire agreement was concluded in October 2020, but attempts to consolidate a government of national unity have continued to fail ever since, and sporadic violence still offers opportunities for Wagner.

Mozambique, 2019–20

One of Wagner's relatively few failures in Africa was in Mozambique, where the government was engaged in a vicious counter-insurgency in the northern Cabo Delgado province, whose predominantly Muslim population was motivated by a mix of religious enmity and socio-economic grievances. Initially Wagner was engaged simply to provide security during elections, but, in a familiar trajectory, in 2019 this was expanded to training, and then to entering direct operations against the insurgents, paid for by granting

D

VEHICLES

(1) *Wagner Chekan* MRAP personnel carrier; Ukraine, 2022

The *Chekan* (aka the *Shchuka*, "Pike"), was something of a signature vehicle of Wagner in Africa, and later became a regular sight in Ukraine. Based on the Ural 432007-0111-31 truck chassis, this mine-resistant, ambush-protected vehicle could carry up to 18 men; some examples incorporated the turret from a BTR-60 APC, mounting a 14.5mm KPVT heavy machine gun and a secondary 7.62mm PKT. It is painted in factory finish; the white "Z" was one of the most common recognition symbols for Russian forces, and the slogan reads (over-optimistically) "To Kiev!"

(2) *Bukhanka* of *Fakel* Battalion, 2024

This venerable UAZ-452 *Bukhanka* ("Bread Loaf") off-road van is hardly an ideal vehicle for the battlefield, but it is sometimes all these Gazprom-recruited soldiers have. Like the Patriot "technical" below, it is painted in an improvised three-color camouflage scheme. The battalion badge was usually painted on vehicles on an entirely dark blue background.

(3) *Wagner* "technical"; Ukraine & Russia, 2022–23

Wagner operated a heterogeneous fleet of "technicals," trucks, hand-me-down APCs, and whatever it could salvage from the battlefield. This is a UAZ Patriot pickup fitted with a pillar-mounted Pecheneg general-purpose machinegun.

1
В Киев!
Z
2
БАТАЛЬОН
ФАКЕЛ
3
Z
Z

The nomadic Tuareg, whose traditional lands in the southern Sahara and the vast Sahel region cut across what they see as artificial national borders, have lived up to their historical reputation as tough fighters in actions against the Malian FAMa and their Wagner supporters. They achieved a particularly notable success at Tinzaouaten, near the Algerian frontier in northern Mali, in July 2024. (Photo Patrick Robert / Corbis / via Getty Images)

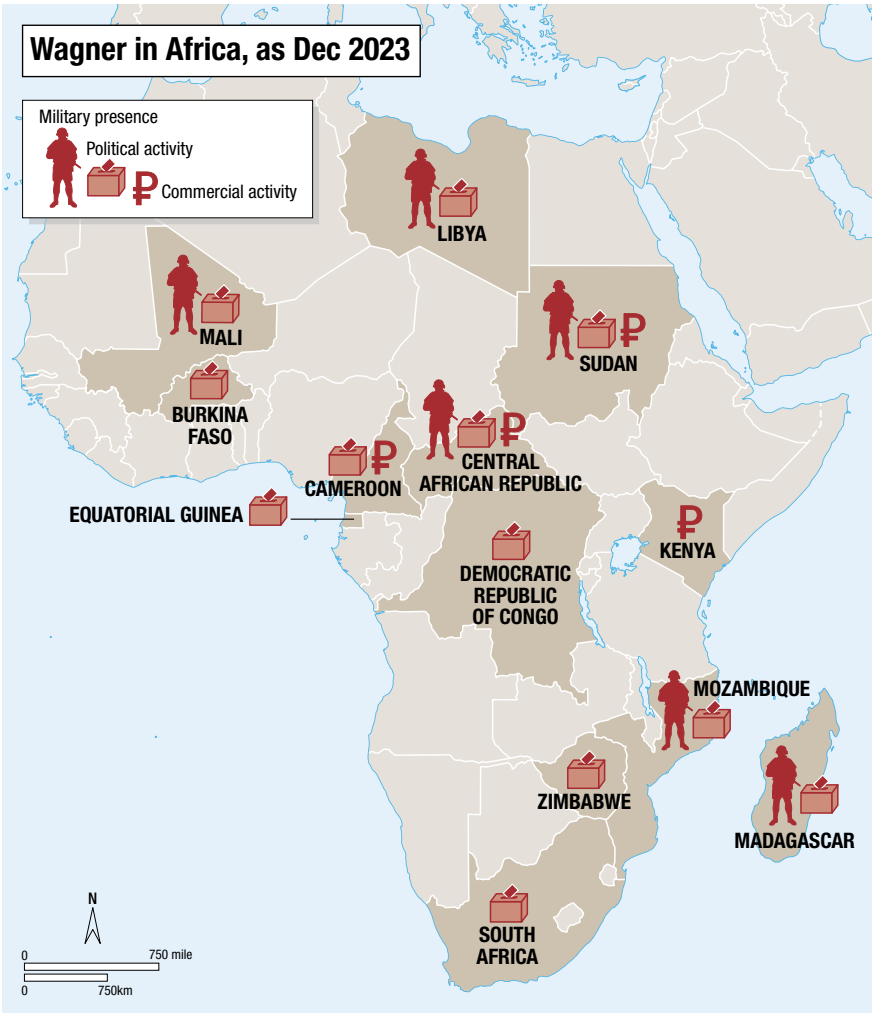
Concord Group companies concessions in Mozambique's natural gas sector. In September 2019 a small force of 200 contactors, with their own drones and helicopters (including an Mi-24 gunship, at least one Mi-17, and a Eurocopter AS350) arrived in Maputo.

Wagner had not had much experience of bush operations, let alone in such thick jungle as carpeted much of Cabo Delgado, and they were overconfident. They failed to develop a good working relationship with the Mozambiquan forces, whom they considered undisciplined, while the locals resented the mercenaries for arrogance – and both were right. The Al-Shabab militants (not to be confused with Somalia's Al-Shabaab) mobilized allies from across the Sahel, and fought a war of ambushes both in the jungle and the towns. Wagner lacked jungle skills; the local knowledge that might have enabled them to close with the rebels; and the firepower to simply steamroll over them. Al-Shabab also proved to be even more ruthless than expected, using widespread intimidation among the population, including public beheadings, to frustrate the mercenaries' efforts to cultivate sources of information. The lack of progress led to mutual recriminations between Wagner and the government, and by November 2019 – although it had lost only a dozen men, largely to ambushes – Wagner pulled out of the fighting. The Concord Group retained some political advisory contracts, but Wagner withdrew from Mozambique at the start of 2020, as rebel activity continued to surge.

This defeat was a learning experience. Future Wagner operations would build in longer lead times for the contractors to familiarize themselves with conditions on the ground, and also to engage local sources of intelligence and cultural guidance. As one former Wagner veteran who had served in Mozambique admitted: "We were cocky, and we were beaten; but we also realized what we needed to do next time."

Mali, from 2021

One of the most extensive Wagner operations is in Mali, which since 2012 has been torn by a civil war between the government in the capital Bamako, in the south, and ethnic Tuareg and jihadist rebels in the north. The French



troops who had previously supported the government (which was itself disrupted by two separate military coups) would be withdrawn by September 2022. Wagner had first arrived in Mali with a security contract in November 2021, but following the French withdrawal its role expanded. By the start of 2023 there were at least 1,000 contractors present, under Ivan Maslov, a former GU officer. They had an operating base close to Bamako's Modibo Keita international airport, with at least four Mi-17 assault helicopters, and also a former French facility at Timbuktu in the north as a forward base. They began combat operations in early 2022, in the Mopti region of central Mali along the de facto front line.

Although there have been persistent and credible allegations of human rights violations by the mercenaries, the Malian authorities and security forces expressed appreciation for Wagner's assistance. The main target, which Prigozhin had promised Bamako that Wagner could deliver, was the rebel stronghold of Kidal. In October 2023 Malian and Wagner forces launched an assault into northern Mali, and in November that town fell to them amid scenes of popular jubilation. Wagner's contractors not only played a key role in the ground fighting – crucially, they took advantage of their more advanced optical equipment to lead a night attack on the rebels – they also

flew reconnaissance and strike drones overhead, and launched encircling raids using UAE-supplied Chinese-made Norinco VP-11 MRAPs. Wagner initially hoisted its own flag over the historic Kidal Fort, although after a few days this was tactfully replaced with the green, gold, and red Malian tricolor.

The war was by no means over, and in July 2024 Wagner would suffer its greatest single loss yet in Africa. After the capture of Kidal the security forces moved on to try to pacify the Tin Essako district to the east and the Algerian border area. They deployed substantial convoys to demonstrate the government's presence, seeking to force rebels to retreat or to go to ground. This is a dangerous approach that almost invites ambush, and that month a joint government-Wagner convoy was indeed attacked by Tuareg rebels backed by jihadists near Tinzaouaten, on the border with Algeria. The resulting extended skirmish lasted three days, and at least 25 and possibly as many as 80 mercenaries were among the fatalities (depending upon whose claims one chooses to believe).

While a real setback, this does not seem, at the time of writing, to have shaken the Russians' determination. Indeed, their willingness to accept losses seems to be appreciated among actual and potential clients in Africa, who compare it favorably with the casualty-averse practices of the West. As the Russians are paid an estimated $10 million per month by Mali – part in direct payment, and part through gold, silver, diamond, and lithium mining concessions – they seem set to stay.

Burkina Faso, from 2024

One of the poorest countries in the world, landlocked Burkina Faso (formerly the Republic of Upper Volta) has been beset by military coups and, since the 2010s, by jihadist insurgencies. In September 2022, when the latest coup brought Capt Ibrahim Traoré to power in the capital, Ouagadougou, he promptly opened negotiations with Wagner. (The fact that demonstrators waved Russian as well as Burkinese flags during his coup might suggest prior contact, but this is just as often simply an all-purpose show of defiance against the West.) Previously a contingent of French troops had been supporting counter-insurgency operations, but they were withdrawn at the ruling junta's request in February 2023. Despite expectations that Wagner would quickly fill the gap, events in Russia prevented this (see below, "The Mutiny"), and it was January 2024 before the first of what was intended as a 300-strong Russian mercenary force arrived from Wagner's successor organization, the "African Corps" (described below). Established in an operations base at Loumbila, northeast of the capital, these contractors may in fact be from another Russian PMC, the *Medvedy* ("Bears").

Interludes in Venezuela, 2019 & 2024

In a rare venture into the Americas, in 2019 Wagner sent more than a hundred mercenaries to Caracas to bolster security for President Nicolás Maduro during a period of public unrest following rigged elections. Arguably their main role was to provide additional protection for Russian corporate interests there, and they would return in a similar capacity in 2024, coinciding with another blatantly falsified election. Venezuela was always a sideline, but one which met with the Kremlin's approval.

THE INVASION OF UKRAINE

Its invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 found the Russian Army well equipped with armored vehicles, and with artillery such as this MT-12 100mm smoothbore AT gun. However, a shortage of experienced infantry created a renewed "market opportunity" for Wagner. (Russian Ministry of Defense CC 4.0)

Scraping the barrel

At first, Wagner was not called upon for the February 2022 invasion. The Russian political leadership expected an easy win with little actual combat, and in any case Gen Alexeyev saw this as an opportunity to supplant Wagner with *Redut*, which had become his PMC of choice. It was Redut which was in the first wave of the invasion, also being tasked with sabotage and assassination missions in Kyiv. The unit thus suffered catastrophic losses in the first days of the war, when Putin's battle plan turned out to be fatally flawed, and the Ukrainians, who had been anticipating the attack, proved themselves to be inventive and determined enemies. Some reports claim that Redut suffered up to 90 percent casualties, and while this may be an exaggeration it is clear that the unit soon ceased to be an operational force.

The invaders had a pressing need for skilled infantry. While the Ukrainians had mobilized, the Russians had not, both in the interests of security and because of Putin's ill-informed assumptions that Kyiv would not resist. With the commital of conscripts legally barred – since Putin insisted that this was a "Special Military Operation" (SVO), rather than a national war – the high command was having to rely on volunteer *kontraktniki* troops, and there simply were not enough available.

The *Espaniola* Battalion

One mark of the army's hunger for manpower was its willingness to engage the *Espaniola* Battalion, a small PMC largely recruited from "ultras" among gangs of violent football hooligans. Its founder, Stanislav "Spaniard" Orlov, was one of the Russian volunteers who had fought in the Donbas, eventually forming his own "Skull & Bones" militia before joining the Union of Donbas Volunteers. He was reportedly involved in a Moscow-backed coup attempt in Montenegro in 2016, to try to forestall its joining NATO. Espaniola

One mark of Wagner's increasing size in 2022, and thus also of Prigozhin's renewed political muscle, was the degree to which it acquired new weapons and capabilities. These included helicopters and fixed-wing aircraft, even including some Su-25 jets. This ageing but reliable ground-attack aircraft is popularly nicknamed the *Shturmovik*, after the famous World War II Ilyushin Il-2 tank-buster. (Photo Fedor Leukhin / Wikimedia Commons CC 2.0)

A Chechen soldier (left) and a Wagner mercenary, both wearing white recognition armbands, in the ruins of Mariupol. Wagner fought there in March 2022, but was mostly committed to attacks on Popasna by the time of the decisive push early in May against the Azov Rgt defenders of the Ukrainian Army's last stronghold, inside the Azovstal Iron & Steel Works. (Photo Maximilian Clarke / SOPA Images / LightRocket / via Getty Images)

recruits its members particularly from the hooligan "firms" associated with teams such as Shakhtar (Donetsk), CSKA, Spartak, Lokomotiv, and Torpedo from Moscow, Zenit (St. Petersburg), Ural (Yekaterinburg), and others from southern Russia. It has a reputation for brutality even by the standards of its peers, but also for being valuable in a fight, earned in the battles for Mariupol, Kherson, Bakhmut, and Avdiivka. It is unusual in allowing women not just to join, but to fight in front-line assault groups.

Wagner's return to the Donbas

It was a seller's market for soldiers – and Prigozhin was in the market. Within three weeks of the start of the invasion there were almost 1,000 Wagner contractors in-country, many hurriedly pulled out of Africa, but clearly this was nowhere near enough. Prigozhin launched a major recruiting drive, including in Belarus and even in Syria (and also re-admitted mercenaries who had been dismissed for drunkenness or insubordination), and by June 2022 his strength was close to 25,000.

Most were deployed in the Donbas, and their new status was evident by the degree to which they were suddenly again able to request and receive all kinds of heavy equipment from the regular military, including T-72B3 tanks, *Pantsir*-S1 AA systems, and *Msta*-S 152mm self-propelled guns. Indeed, this "army within an army" even acquired its own rudimentary air force. In May 2022, when an Su-25 ground-attack jet was shot down near the town of Popasna, it turned out that the pilot was former MajGen Kanamat Botashev,

E

PMCs IN UKRAINE

(1) Officer, PMC *Redut*; Kyiv front, February 2022

Redut was the favored Private Military Company of the Russian Defense Ministry, which explains why this junior officer is wearing the latest Ratnik field kit also issued to the regular military, including a 6B45 vest and 6B47 helmet, and carries a modern 5.45mm AK-12 rifle. This PMC's status also explains why, in anticipation of easy success, it received the poisonous glory of being deployed in the van of the initial Russian advance toward Kyiv in February 2022. It suffered very heavy losses (unconfirmed reports even suggest up to 90 percent dead or wounded), and this shaken volunteer is spattered with a comrade's blood. The green armband was one of the recognition symbols adopted for this operation. "Subdued" Russian rank insignia on the shoulder straps are usually invisible when wearing a tactical vest, but he displays on his right upper sleeve the full-color Redut patch **(1a)**.

(2) *Wagner* rocket artilleryman, off duty, 2022

Evidence of the welcome given to Wagner by the Defense Ministry as the initial invasion turned into a hard-fought slog was the increasing transfer of heavy equipment to the mercenaries. This ranged from battle tanks to artillery pieces, including the 122mm BM-21 *Grad* multiple rocket launcher which this gunner helps to serve. Some Wagner soldiers had already trained as artillerymen, and others were quickly forced to learn. This recruit comes from the distant and impoverished Buryatia Region, attracted by the inflated salaries that Prigozhin was offering in order to expand his force.

(3) *Rusych* Group scout; Kharkiv front, 2022

While Putin unconvincingly claimed that the "Special Military Operation" was intended to "de-Nazify" Ukraine, the irony is that there were far-right fighters on both sides. Wagner, for example, now included the Sabotage Assault-Reconnaissance Group (DShRG) *Rusych*, known for its pagan and white-supremacist membership. This squad leader is signaling his men to hold their positions, as they try to outflank Ukrainians in the Kharkiv area. His helmet is a cut-away LShZ-1+, much favored by scouts, and here with a cover matching his Flora-pattern battledress. Over this he wears a black Fort Defender 2 plate-carrier, from which he has discarded the deep groin plate for ease of movement. On his left sleeve and chest, respectively, he displays the Rusych shoulder patch **(3a)** and a blood-group label **(3b)**. He carries his magazines in a six-pouch web belt worn over the armor, and is armed with a suppressed SR-3M *Vikhr*, a compact 9mm assault rifle designed as an evolution of the AS *Val*, with a PSO-1 'scope.

2
3
3a
РУСИЧ
O (I) Rh(–)
3b
1
ЧВК РЕДУТ
1a

Despite its ability to recruit from the prison camps under "Project K" in 2022–23, Wagner was still desperate to attract more men, especially veterans. This advertising billboard in Krasnogorsk reads "Join PMC Wagner – Show the World What You are Worth." (Contributor / via Getty Images)

an Air Force officer cashiered in 2013 and recently hired by Wagner. The PMC acquired not just these tough little "*shturmoviki*" but even a flight of supersonic Su-24 bombers, flying out of Millerovo airbase near Rostov-on-Don.

As Putin abandoned his ill-fated initial attempt to take Kyiv, Russian efforts became focused on the Donbas, Zaporizhia, and Kherson regions in southeast Ukraine. In the Donbas, Wagner was increasingly crucial to such Russian advances as were achieved. In March 2022 its 7th ShO under Anton "Lotos" Yelizarov took part in the brutal fighting for the port city of Mariupol, although army and DNR forces would do most of the work there. By April, there were sufficient Wagner forces in-theater that they could take on an operation themselves, and elements of the 5th ShO under Alexei "Terek" Nagin and the 4th ShO now under Nikolai "Bes" Budko led the assault on the road and rail junction of Popasna. With the regulars providing both artillery bombardments and some paratroopers in support, the mercenaries were able to take Popasna in May, demonstrating the tactics they would employ in future urban engagements: using drones for reconnaissance and AGS-17 automatic grenade launchers in indirect fire mode as "pocket artillery," and advancing in small platoon-strength dismounted infantry units. Meanwhile, "Ratibor" Kuznetsov's 1st ShO was looping across the plain southeast of Popasna, meeting tough Ukrainian resistance but breaking into the city nonetheless. In May and June they pushed farther, providing shock troops for major combined assaults on the towns of Severodonetsk and Lysychansk.

"Project K": Convict recruitment

Wagner was acquiring a name for combat effectiveness, but it was also taking significant losses, while competing with other PMCs and the regular military for replacements. So Prigozhin (himself a survivor of years in a Soviet penal camp) came up with "Project K": to recruit fighters from among "*zeks*" – convicts in Russia's brutal and overcrowded penal system – with the promise of release as the survivors' subsequent reward. In June 2022 Prigozhin recruited a platoon from high-security prison camps in the St. Petersburg Region. In a month of hard fighting they suffered 15 percent casualties, but proved tough and willing enough that he judged the experiment successful. From July onward Prigozhin traveled from camp to camp, offering 100,000 roubles a month (more than double the Russian average wage), and amnesty after six months' fighting. It was a blunt pitch to patriotism, machismo, and self-interest combined: "No one falls back, no one retreats, no one surrenders… I take you out of here alive, but don't always bring you back alive."

In effect, there would now be two types of Wagner troops: the hard core of well-trained and well-equipped veteran contractors, and the units of former convicts. The latter – often badly trained and undisciplined, and with hand-me-down kit – were nevertheless useful cannon-fodder for so-called "meat

wave" attacks, which would spare the experienced veterans while forcing Ukrainian defenders to reveal their positions. The convicts' casualties were predictably high, but they helped tip the balance in many battles, being sacrificed in order to inflict losses on seasoned Ukrainian units. At the same time the influx of criminals, including rapists and murderers, further degraded the mercenaries' already brutal and ruthless internal culture.

Part of the iconography of Wagner from late 2022 was the sledgehammer: it began to appear on informal unit patches, and Prigozhin himself kept in his house an oversized hammer inscribed "for important negotiations." The gory origins lie in the fate of Yevgeny Nuzhin, a convicted murderer serving a 26-year prison sentence in Camp IK-3 Ryazan when Prigozhin visited it on one of his recruiting trips. Nuzhin signed up, but scarcely a week after arriving in Lugansk he surrendered to the Ukrainians. Despite having previously declared loyalist sentiments, he now claimed that he had only joined up in order to get out of prison and take his first opportunity to surrender. Unfortunately for him, he was included in a prisoner swap on November 11, 2022, and the Russian authorities returned him to Wagner's tender mercies. Shortly thereafter, a video appeared on social media: "The Hammer of Revenge" showed Nuzhin being killed with a sledgehammer to the head. Prigozhin later called this a "dog's death for a dog," endorsing the increasing brutality of Wagner's internal discipline.

A well-equipped soldier from the infamous *Rusych* Group, photographed in 2023 near Verbovoye, Ukraine. He has flip-down night-vision optics on his helmet, and is armed with what may be a 12.7mm ASVK anti-matériel rifle in addition to a customized AKM-74. (Press Service of the Sabotage Assault-Reconnaissance Group "Rusych" CC 4.0)

2022–23: Out of the shadows, into the meatgrinder

By September 2022 Prigozhin, who had always publicly maintained – however implausibly – that he had nothing to do with Wagner, could come triumphantly out of the shadows. Indeed, Wagner itself "went corporate," moving into an office block in St. Petersburg emblazoned with its sedate new logo of a plain "W" instead of the piratical old skull-and-crosshairs. In consequence, Prigozhin became something of a cult figure among Russia's so-called "turbo-patriots," and he exploited his new-found public status to prosecute some of the feuds he had been nurturing for so long. In particular, he became increasingly open in his criticism of Defense Minister Shoigu and his collaborator, Chief of the General Staff Gen Valery Gerasimov.

However, Prigozhin had to keep delivering results in order to remain in favor, and as a result he seems incautiously to have promised Putin that by Victory Day 2023 (May 9 in the Russian calendar), Wagner could deliver the city of Bakhmut, formerly known as Artemivsk. The fall of Popasna had opened the road toward Bakhmut; while of little real value itself, its capture might allow the Russians to encircle Ukrainian forces in the Sievierodonetsk-Lysychansk salient to the northeast, while beyond that lay the more strategic towns of Slovyansk and Kramatorsk. Bakhmut soon became a "grudge match," with both sides becoming consumed by a back-and-forth struggle that left the city in ruins, and both sinking more men and resources into the battle than it merited. Although regular units also fought at Bakhmut, to a large degree this was Wagner's operation – and, in some ways, it would be its swansong.

A member of one of the Chechen-led Akhmat battalions displays a slight variant of the shoulder patch illustrated as Plate G2a on page 55. (Photo Vladimir Aleksandrov / Anadolu Agency / via Getty Images)

By August 2022 Wagner forces had reached the outskirts of the city, but through September the main fighting was limited to villages around its northern and eastern periphery. The howitzers and MRLs of the regular army's 144th Guards Motor Rifle Div poured in steady fire, bringing down the main bridge across the Bakhmutka River which bisected the city. On October 8, Wagner claimed that its assault on the city itself had begun, although Kyiv stated that defenders were still holding it up in the outskirts. By this stage Wagner was able to muster some 50,000 men, including large numbers of convict troops as well as effective but unsavory units such as *Rusych*.

Rusych

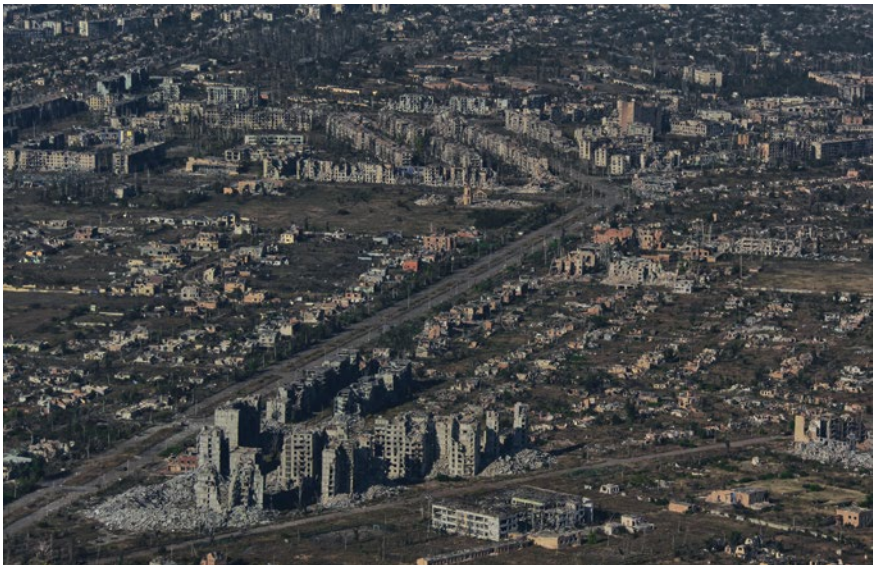
Even by Wagner's standards the Rusych Sabotage Assault-Reconnaissance Group (DShRG) had a dark reputation, as a skilled but brutal unit of neo-Nazis and self-proclaimed pagans following the Slavic *Rodnovery* tradition. Founded in 2014 by an ex-paratrooper and avowed Nazi, Alexei "Serb" Milchakov, and Yan "Slavyan" Petrovsky, Rusych fought first in the Donbas, leaving a trail of allegations of abuse, torture, and murder. Initially it subordinated itself to Bednov's LNR Batman Rapid Response Group; after his assassination in 2015, Rusych first took service with the Prizrak Bde, before breaking with the LNR leadership, and moving to the DNR to join its ultra-nationalist Viking Brigade. However, by the end of 2015 Rusych had left the Donbas, and instead began providing paramilitary training alongside another PMC known for its ultra-nationalist stance, the ENOT Corporation. In 2017, as Wagner's role in Syria had diminished, Rusych won contracts there for security at Russian-owned oil and gas facilities.

In April 2022, Rusych – by this time around 100 strong, including some Poles and Scandinavians – joined the war in Ukraine. In the hope of restraining its excesses, one condition was that it be incorporated as a semi-autonomous element of Wagner. Considering that Wagner itself was becoming increasingly degraded, it is unsurprising that this did not have the desired effect. In April 2023, for example, Rusych posted on social media a video of the decapitation of a Ukrainian prisoner.

Taking Bakhmut essentially meant blowing it apart, block by block. The BM-27 *Uragan* 220mm multiple rocket launcher was extensively used, delivering not only high explosive unitary warheads but also those which scattered submunitions – anti-personnel mines – in order to hinder Ukrainian tactical retreats. (Russian Ministry of Defense CC 4.0)

Bakhmut: Stalingrad in miniature

Bakhmut proved to be a nightmarish example of close-quarters battle in an urban environment, which was quickly blasted to rubble, crosscut



The final capture of Bakhmut was in many ways a Pyrrhic victory: the city was utterly ruined, and Wagner had lost a large proportion of its forces. (Libkos / via Getty Images)

by trenches, and densely sown with mines and booby-traps. Although it is commonly claimed that Wagner relied on throwing its convict troops at the Ukrainians in "meat waves," this battle was actually fought largely by small assault teams, typically of anything from 5–20 men, probing for weak points in the defenders' lines. When one team was decimated, another would be deployed, keeping up constant pressure on the exhausted Ukrainians – though at the cost of painfully high casualties. Up to the start of this battle, US intelligence sources had estimated that Wagner had suffered some 5,000 dead or wounded in Ukraine. By November, this had risen to almost 15,000 (including the 5th ShO's "Terek" Nagin), and to almost 30,000 by mid-February 2023, mainly in Bakhmut.

By mid-December 2022 the fighting was approaching the heart of Bakhmut, although the Ukrainians were able to win some respite by staging a counterattack supported by Wolfhound MRAPs supplied by the UK. By this stage, Prigozhin was admitting that Bakhmut had become a "meatgrinder." In January 2023 the intensity of fighting declined, and Kyiv began to hope that the Wagner assault had run out of steam. However, the reason was rather that the mercenaries were pivoting to take part in the final assault on the salt-mining town of Soledar just to the northwest of Bakhmut. At least one BTG from the Russian 144th Div, as well as elements from the LNR's 6th Cossack Rgt, and Chechen-led mercenaries from two Akhmat battalions, had been grinding away at its defenders, who came largely from Ukraine's 46th Airmobile Bde and elements of the 93rd Mechanized Brigade. The arrival of reinforcements from Wagner under "Lotos" Yelizarov finally allowed a breakthrough, and by January 16 what was left of Soledar had fallen.

Akhmat battalions

These units were provided by Ramzan Kadyrov, the mercurial warlord of Russia's Chechen region, who prides himself on his personal security forces – the so-called *Kadyrovtsi* ("Kadyrovites") – who are bound to him by a personal oath of loyalty. Seeing the rise of Wagner and Prigozhin's consequent new status, in 2022 Kadyrov created "*Akhmat* battalions" (named after his late father) under overall command of MajGen Apti Alaudinov. Although

The casualties suffered by the mercenaries in such battles as Bakhmut were horrific. This section in Kazan's Kurgan cemetery is specifically for the graves of Wagner Group contractors. (Photo Vyacheslav Kirillin / Wikimedia Commons CC BY-SA 4.0)

the command staffs are all Chechen, most of the rank-and-file mercenaries are recruited elsewhere: around 75 percent from the other North Caucasus republics, and the rest from either Russia or farther afield – there are even some Syrians in the ranks. Kadyrov ensures that they are lavishly (if miscellaneously) equipped, but in the opinion of many Russian troops they are keener on posting self-glorifying videos than actually fighting. When they have fought, however – such as at Soledar in 2022, and during Ukraine's incursion into Russia's Kursk Region in 2024 – some have earned an effective combat reputation.

A promise broken

After the capture of Soledar, Wagner's forces could once more concentrate on Bakhmut, and since they could now also attack from the north the Ukrainians' position was increasingly difficult. In February 2023, although President Volodymyr Zelensky called the city "our fortress" and promised that "nobody will give away Bakhmut," by that time Kyiv's Western allies were pressing for a full strategic withdrawal. For a while the Ukrainians appeared convinced, but in March they decided that the value of the defense in fixing and wearing down some of Russia's best troops was worth the cost. Nonetheless, on March 7 they abandoned Bakhmut east of the Bakhmutka River. Its banks became a killing ground, especially as the regular Russian military withdrew some of the assets it had committed to support Wagner

F

WAGNER IN UKRAINE

(1 & 2) *Wagner* sniper team; Bakhmut, 2022–23

By the time of the battle for Bakhmut, Wagner comprised at least two distinct component forces, since the Defense Ministry's pressure on Prigozhin had obliged him to greatly expand the mercenary force. In contrast with the new and scarcely-trained convict recruits, there were still experienced veterans who were increasingly kitted out much the same as the best of the regular military. This sniper team operating in a recently captured apartment block are a case in point. Both are wearing mainly Ratnik kit, though the sniper **(1)** has laid aside his backpack and wears only basic webbing. He displays one of the many non-standard Wagner patches which proliferated as the mercenary force expanded and emerged into public recognition. He has been issued one of the latest precision rifles in the Russian arsenal, the TsKIB SOO MTs-566 chambered in 7.62mm NATO, with suppressor and 20x optic sights. The spotter **(2)** has an improvised helmet cover, and has had to obtain a pair of Chinese binoculars commercially. Lengths of the St. George ribbon were also often displayed on rifles, usually hanging from the buttstock.

(3) Convict recruit in "meat wave" attack, 2022–23

Some of the convicts Wagner recruited would fight hard; others needed to be urged forward under the threat of "zeroing" – summary field execution. Their reluctance was understandable, since they were often deployed in the van, with second-rate equipment, simply to soak up casualties while forcing the Ukrainians to reveal their positions by returning fire. This soldier, trying desperately to dodge a grenade dropped by a Ukrainian drone, is largely equipped with Soviet surplus kit: a KZS Beryozka Dubok camouflage uniform, albeit with more modern 6Sh104 webbing; the M88 boots originally issued during the invasion of Afghanistan; and an early-model AK-74 rifle. His only insignia is a makeshift white plastic recognition armband tied around his right sleeve.

(4) Second *Wagner* patch, 2022

In 2022, as the expanded Wagner Group "went public" and Prigozhin stepped forward to claim credit for it, the PMC acquired new standing and a corporate identity. Before it opted for an even more understated "W" patch (see Plate G2 on page 55), the skull-in-crosshairs was replaced with this second less dramatic "PMC Wagner" design surrounded with the words: "Blood. Honor. Justice. Motherland. Courage."

2
1
ЧВК ВАГНЕР
КРОВЬ • ЧЕСТЬ • СПРАВЕДЛИВОСТЬ • РОДИНА • ОТВАГА
3
4

because these were needed farther to the south. Prigozhin angrily considered this withdrawal to be deliberate sabotage by Shoigu, but doubled down on his efforts to take the city by Victory Day.

His forces ground painfully forward, and on April 2 Prigozhin had himself photographed hoisting a Russian flag near what he said was Bakhmut's administration building. A week later he claimed that 80 percent of the city was in Wagner's hands, although both the photo opportunity and the subsequent claim were primarily to reassure the Kremlin. By this point there were some 25,000 Wagner fighters committed to the battle (essentially its whole remaining strength), of whom more than half were ex-convicts. In some cases the latter were being driven forward by "blocking units" behind them, ready to shoot them down if they faltered (in the tradition of the World War II Soviet NKVD).

By the end of April 2023 Wagner had forced the defenders out of most of Bakhmut, but then the Ukrainians mounted a counterattack. It became clear that Prigozhin would not have his promised gift for Putin's Victory Day, as he admitted that "heavy, bloody battles" were continuing throughout the city. True to form, he blamed Shoigu and Gerasimov, claiming – probably groundlessly – that his forces were being starved of ammunition, and threatening that Wagner would withdraw from Bakhmut on May 10. It is doubtful that he would have carried through what would, in effect, have been an act of treason, but his threats worried Putin enough that he forced Shoigu,

August 2024: a memorial in Moscow to mercenaries fallen in Ukraine. The banners are (left to right): the *Espaniola* Bn; the "Victory Banner" for the Great Patriotic War (World War II); the Tsar's Wolves; the Russian Orthodox Army, depicting Christ; the Russian state tricolor; a skull-and-crossbones Don Cossack flag, also used by *Espaniola*; an informal banner for Donbas volunteers; the old "PMC Wagner Group" flag; and the double-headed eagle of the Donetsk People's Republic. The portraits of the dead included Wagner founder Yevgeny Prigozhin, and the flag folded over the frontal "altar" is of the second Wagner design, illustrated as Plate F4 on page 49. (© MV)

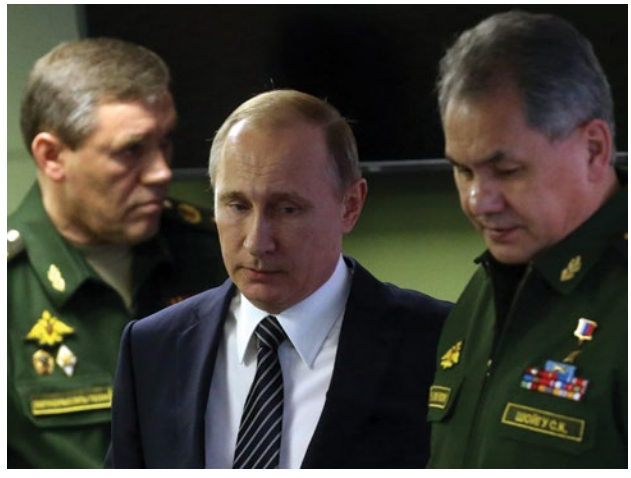
Gerasimov, and Prigozhin to mend fences in a sullen face-to-face meeting. More ammunition was promised, and Gen Surovikin, the honorary Wagner member, was appointed to liaise between the mercenaries and the ministry.

Presumably to make sure Putin had no victory to announce on Victory Day, Ukraine's 3rd Separate Assault Bde then launched a counterattack on the city's outskirts, engaging both Wagner and elements of the army's 72nd Separate Motor Rifle Brigade. Prigozhin furiously accused the regulars of fleeing and leaving his flank exposed. Again, he also claimed to be getting only a tenth of the ammunition he had been promised. However, Russian paratroopers were quickly deployed to fill the gap; additional artillery assets were transferred to Bakhmut, and the Ukrainian counterattack soon lost its momentum.

On May 20, 2023 Prigozhin claimed that Bakhmut had finally fallen – although mopping up was by no means over, Wagner would leave that task to regular units. A week later, the DNR's 132nd Separate Guards Motor Rifle Bde and 1st "Wolves" Bde, and a BTG each from the 106th Guards Airborne Div and 76th Guards Air Assault Div, replaced Wagner. Prigozhin had won, but at a terrible cost to his men – and in the meantime, he had been outflanked politically.

President Putin in a meeting with Defense Minister Shoigu (right) and Chief of the General Staff Gerasimov, while visiting the National Defense Management Center in Moscow. Prigozhin's feud with Shoigu was his undoing: not only was the minister a much more capable political operator, but – unlike Prigozhin – he was also a personal friend and confidant of the president. (Photo Mikhail Svetlov / via Getty Images)

THE MUTINY



Shoigu's revenge

Prigozhin would post videos on social media insulting and denouncing the defense minister, but the wily Shoigu operated behind the scenes. According to several accounts, he had not been that keen on the Ukraine invasion in the first place, but now that Russia was locked in a war he argued through summer 2022 for a mobilization of reservists. Putin was hesitant over the probable political backlash, but in September he was persuaded to call up 300,000 men, largely from impoverished outlying rural

During Wagner's brief period of public exposure, in October 2022 an administrative center on St. Petersburg's Zolnaya Street provided offices for the PMC and Prigozhin's other enterprises. (Photo Olga Maltseva / AFP / via Getty Images)

ColGen Sergei Surovikin C-in-C of Aerospace Forces and an "honorary member" of Wagner, was detained under suspicion of having prior knowledge of the mutiny. He eventually re-emerged in an obscure bureaucratic post. (Photo Russian Defense Ministry / Handout / Anadolu Agency / via Getty Images)

regions. This allowed Gen Gerasimov to launch further wasteful offensives, and it also meant that Wagner was no longer quite so indispensable. Meanwhile, Shoigu sacked Gen Dmitry Bulgakov, head of military logistics – not only because logistics had been mishandled since the start of the invasion, but also because Bulgakov was notoriously Prigozhin's "inside man" at the Defense Ministry. In February 2023 Shoigu also managed to persuade Putin to prevent Wagner from continuing to recruit from prison camps (the army would soon start to create its own Storm-Z convict assault units). As if this were not enough, new mercenary units were creating more competition for Wagner.

Prigozhin's long-held grudge against Shoigu was redoubled by his infuriated awareness that he was being outflanked. He also seems genuinely to have been angered not only by the casualties suffered by "his boys," but also by what he saw as the incompetence of the overall war effort. Although he was obviously aware that the greatest taboo was public criticism of Putin, on Victory Day 2023 he released a video in which he complained that "our soldiers are being killed, and the happy grandpa thinks that everything's fine," going on to be even ruder about "grandpa" – a common euphemism for the then 70-year-old president. When Bakhmut finally fell, Prigozhin thanked his soldiers, Surovikin, and Putin, but accused Gerasimov and Shoigu of "practically assisting the enemy."

The final blow fell when, on June 10, 2023, Shoigu issued an order that all "volunteer groups" – the usual term for mercenary forces – had only until July 1 to sign official contracts with the Defense Ministry. In effect, this was a hostile takeover of Wagner, which Prigozhin was not willing to accept. His only recourse was to try to persuade Putin to exempt Wagner from the order, but Putin (who tends to duck confrontations and difficult decisions) was lying low. Prigozhin found that his Kremlin pass had been revoked, and he could not get through to Putin by telephone. He had only two choices: escalation or submission. Prigozhin, being Prigozhin, chose the former.

Taking Rostov

Contrary to some far-fetched claims, Prigozhin's mutiny was never an attempt to topple Putin; it was an act of coercive negotiation, just as Renaissance *condottieri* used to lead soldiers against their paymasters to force favorable revision of their contracts. He hoped, by a show of force, to make Putin realize that he, not Shoigu, was indispensable, and his original plan had been to present the president with a *fait accompli* by actually seizing Shoigu and Gerasimov while they were on a scheduled visit to the SVO headquarters in the nearby city of Rostov-on-Don on June 26.

Prigozhin mustered his forces, concentrating them closer to the Ukraine / Russian border, and may perhaps have

sounded out Surovikin as to how his fellow generals might respond to an insubordinate demonstration. "Sedoy" Troshev informed the authorities in Rostov that Wagner would be passing through on its way to return equipment lent to it by the Defense Ministry, yet the security apparatus seems not to have reacted until June 21. On that day the FSB's Military Counter-Intelligence Directorate (whose task is, as much as anything, to keep tabs on the soldiers) got wind that something was being planned. Before the authorities could react, Prigozhin, realizing that his original kidnap plan was now untenable, hurriedly improvised.

Wagner contractors standing around a BTR-82A personnel carrier on the streets of Rostov-on-Don on June 24, 2023. The Kremlin has tried to suppress continued discussion of the mutiny, but the event has lodged itself not only in the general Russian public's memories but also in the mythologies of ultra-nationalist "turbo-patriots." (Photo Arkady Budnitsky / Anadolu Agency / via Getty Images)

On June 23, Prigozhin released two video statements which, in hindsight, were obvious attempts to justify his imminent mutiny. The first was a broadside against the Defense Ministry and, indeed, the whole official justification for the war. He tried to give Putin an escape route by claiming that the president had been misled by Shoigu and an "oligarchic clan" who had urged the invasion for their own profit and glory. In a second video, he claimed that the military had launched a missile strike on a Wagner base, which seems to have been a complete fabrication.

Early in the morning of June 24, Wagner forces crossed back into Russia, watched by perplexed and indecisive Border Troops. By this time Wagner's total strength was close to 20,000, but no more than 10,000–12,000 seem to have been involved in the mutiny. Later that morning, they rolled into Rostov-on-Don without resistance; the military garrison and National

A Wagner machine-gunner in front of a memorial in Rostov on June 24, 2023, manning a PKM. On both sleeves he displays the silver tape recognition armbands adopted by the mutineers. (Photo Roman Romokhov / AFP / via Getty Images)

One of the Wagner Group's T-72 tanks controlling a street in Rostov-on-Don; it displays roughly-painted red "Z" recognition symbols and the name "Siberia." Note also the flag bearing the intermediate 2022 version of the PMC Wagner insignia. (Stringer / AFP / via Getty Images)

Guard chose to confine themselves to barracks, and where the police were visible they mainly busied themselves in keeping civilians out of the way of any potential crossfire. The mercenaries, identifying themselves by improvised silver armbands made out of electrical tape, quickly took over the SVO headquarters. While Prigozhin reassured Russia that he would do nothing to interfere with the conduct of the war, he organized a meeting with his old GU boss LtGen Alexeyev and Deputy Defense Minister ColGen Yunus-bek Yevkurov. While his men established their control over the city center, mining some approaches and setting up checkpoints and AA positions, Prigozhin sat down with his involuntary guests.

Yevkurov, a decorated veteran of the old school, was genuinely perplexed by Prigozhin's mutiny. Alexeyev, by contrast, was heard on video replying to Prigozhin's assertion that "we want to get the Chief of the General Staff and Shoigu" with an apparently light-hearted invitation to "Take them!" This illustrated one of the striking characteristics of the mutiny. Prigozhin had claimed that "half the army" would join him, but in fact only a few dozen serving soldiers deserted to his cause. However, the bulk of the security forces and army seemed equally disinclined to stop him. Like Alexeyev and the Rostov garrison, they simply stood aside. Meanwhile, ordinary citizens on Rostov's streets, at first nervous of the mercenaries, began to take selfies with them before carrying on with their normal daily lives, and cheered them as they left.

THE MUTINY, JUNE 2023

(1) Yevgeny Prigozhin, Rostov-on-Don

While Prigozhin himself never engaged in battle he increasingly took to wearing combat gear, at first in Africa and then in Ukraine. At Rostov he only occasionally appeared carrying an AK-74 or AKS-74U, but he did wear a jacket and tactical vest liberally festooned with patches. Two of these **(1a & 1b)** bore the words *Gruz 200 my vmeste* ("We [stand] with the Cargo 200s" – a reference to the codeword for combat fatalities). The name of PMC Wagner appeared as in **(1c)**, and its second-pattern patch (obscured, on his right shoulder) is illustrated as Plate F4, page 49.

(2) *Wagner* scout, M4 highway

Utkin's rapid advance toward Moscow was eased by the PMC's experience of operating in small, autonomous units often moving in light vehicles, like this UAZ Patriot pickup truck. This scout is evidently battle-proven; he has been issued A-TACS Multicam battledress and an Atlas helmet with a matching cover, and he chooses to sport a ghoulish personal facemask. He displays on his left shoulder the subdued third regulation version of the Wagner patch, a white "W" encircled by lettering on a black rectangle, but on a chest pouch of his tactical vest he retains an informal one **(2a)**, which riffs on the group's occasional nickname of "the Orchestra." His AK-74M is fitted with the Zenitka Lider upgrade kit including a new stock, foregrip, and Vzor collimator sight (see also Plate D3, page 37, for vehicle).

(3) *Wagner* air-defense operator, M4 highway

As Utkin's flying column advanced the only serious resistance it met came from the Aerospace Forces. Unfortunately for the aircrews, the mercenary force's expansion into, effectively, a parallel army had brought it a range of air-defense assets, from *Pantsir*-S1 (SA-22 Grayhound) self-propelled gun and missile systems down to, as here, MANPADS launchers. In total, they accounted for at least three helicopters and an Il-22M command-and-control aircraft, killing perhaps 15 airmen. This mercenary, wearing SS-Leto Partizan summer camouflage and a 6B7-M1 helmet, seeks confirmation of the order to launch a projectile from Russia's latest 9K33 *Verba* (SA-29 Gizmo), a fourth-generation infrared homing system in service since 2014 as a replacement for the 9K38 *Igla*. His shoulder patch is that illustrated as Plate B3a, page 23.

3
1
ГРУЗ 200 МЫ ВМЕСТЕ
ЧВК ВАГНЕРА
2
2a
ВАГНЕР
МУЖЧИНЫ, КОТОРЫХ ЗНАЕТ ВЕСЬ МИР
1c
ЧВК ВАГНЕРА
ГРУЗ 200 МЫ ВМЕСТЕ
1a
1b
ГРУЗ 200 МЫ ВМЕСТЕ

The “March of Justice” June 24, 2023
MOSCOW
Podolsk
Blockades on Oka River
Oka R.
Kaluga
Ryazan
Tula
RUSSIA
Bryansk
Krasnoye
Wagner advances toward Moscow
Oryol
Lipetsk
Tambov
Aerospace Forces attack convoy
Kursk
VORONEZH
M4 Highway
Buturlinovka
Belgorod
Pavlovsk
Bogochar
Don R.
UKRAINE
Millerovo
Dnipro R.
Bakhmut
PMC Wagner
Shakhtinsky
N
Mariupol
ROSTOV-ON-DON
0
75 mile
0
75km
Black Sea

The "March of Justice"

In itself, just occupying Rostov was not enough to advance Prigozhin's cause, so, while he hunkered down there with the bulk of his strength, he announced a "March of Justice." A force of around 1,000 men took the nearby Millerovo airbase, either to protect Wagner's own air assets or to prevent the aircraft there from being used against the mutineers. At the same time, Utkin and at most 4,000 men were already heading up the M4 highway toward Moscow, 600 miles to the north, ostensibly to collar the elusive Shoigu and Gerasimov. Of course, Prigozhin knew full well that against any serious opposition such a small force could never fight its way to Moscow, never mind take it, so he must have been desperately upping the ante in the hope of shaking Putin.

Wagner troops in VPK-Ural *Spartak* MRAPs, cheered by crowds as they leave Rostov at the end of the mutiny. (Photo Feodor Larin / Anadolu Agency / via Getty Images)

As a military operation the march was impressive. Utkin's forces, in APCs, trucks, and "technicals," accompanied by self-propelled guns and AA systems as well as some tanks on flatbed transporters, moved at speed. Notionally loyalist forces along the route either stayed out of the way or made only desultory attempts to block the roads with buses or the like. Ironically, only Gen Surovikin's air forces made any serious challenge, and along the highway the mercenaries would shoot down at least three helicopters (one Ka-52, two Mi-8) and one of Russia's rare Il-22M airborne command-and-control aircraft. A battalion-strength element also detoured to take the Buturlinovka airbase in Voronezh Region, although most of them soon rejoined the main convoy.

Since the aim was to make a performative thrust toward Moscow, Utkin made no effort to occupy any of the towns and cities along the way. They passed the city of Voronezh at lunchtime on June 24, when a brief skirmish saw two stray AA missiles fired by the convoy go astray, one hitting an oil depot. By mid-afternoon the convoy was in Lipetsk Region, some 250 miles short of Moscow, and there were signs of a somewhat panicky official response. Unsuccessful efforts were made to block the M4 by digging up the road; Moscow announced a "counter-terrorism security regime," and began to assemble blocking forces along the Oka River south of the capital. These were a scratch mix of the National Guard's Dzerzhinsky Div, signalers from the paratroops' 38th Guards Communications Bde, and whatever else the authorities could deploy. Meanwhile, although the official line was that Putin remained in the Kremlin coordinating the response, observers noted that an aircraft from his Presidential Wing took off and headed for St. Petersburg.

A Belarusian Army soldier walks through the newly-built tented camp at Tsel in Belarus. This could eventually have accommodated up to 5,000 Wagner mercenaries had that many been willing to follow Prigozhin into exile, but it was never anywhere near full. It was being partly dismantled by August 2023, even before Prigozhin's death. (Photo Adam Berry / via Getty Images)

A screen-grab captured from Prigozhin's first video after his mutiny, sent from an unspecified location in Africa where he poses with an AKS-74U. In this broadcast he claimed that "the Wagner PMC makes Russia even greater on all continents, and Africa more free," while "making life a nightmare for ISIS, Al-Qaeda, and other bandits." Since his death in a deeply suspect aircrash on August 23, 2023, Russian far-right extremists have perversely elevated the thuggish Prigozhin into a folk hero who spoke truth to power and stood up for what he believed was right. (Wagner Telegram Account / Handout / Anadolu Agency / via Getty Images)

Beforehand, however, Putin had denounced the mutiny as treason on national television. The FSB was raiding Prigozhin's corporate HQ in St. Petersburg and, in a stark reminder of past repressions, was ringing up Wagner contractors' families and "inviting them to interviews." At that point Prigozhin knew that his gamble had failed, and opened back-channel communications with members of the Kremlin team. Utkin's dash continued in order to keep up the pressure, but the only real question was what terms Prigozhin could secure. At 8pm – by which time the "march" had passed Krasnoye in northern Lipetsk, just under 200 miles from Moscow – it was announced that an agreement had been reached, and Wagner was standing down. Prigozhin left Rostov in what seemed almost like triumph, being cheered on the streets.

THE FUTURE

Putin's terms

Prigozhin had obtained a surprisingly – suspiciously – good deal. All criminal charges would be dropped, and he was to move to the neighboring puppet-state of Belarus, along with those of his mercenaries who wished to follow him. Those who preferred to remain in Russia would have to join the army or another PMC; while Wagner was encouraged to maintain its operations in Africa, it could not simply resume its previous presence in southern Ukraine. The following week, Putin even hosted a meeting with Prigozhin and 50 of his officers in the Kremlin. He suggested that Troshev could be put in command of Wagner, but Prigozhin, beginning to regain his confidence, vetoed the idea. Troshev would then leave, joining the Defense Ministry with responsibility for coordinating the operations of the remaining "volunteer groups," a task in which he would be joined by Wagner's former personnel chief, Vadim "Khrustal" Suvorov.

Most of the heavy equipment with which Wagner had been issued was returned to the army. The group's Molkino base was quickly decommissioned, the Wagner flag that flew over it being ceremoniously lowered and transferred to the new base that was being set up for it at Tsel in Belarus's Mogilev region. Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko, who had helped broker the peace deal, said that Wagner would likely remain there "for some time," while Prigozhin suggested that his men could help train the local troops. More to the point, he threw himself into his African ventures with redoubled energy, as if to prove his continued value to the Kremlin.

Putin, however, was having second thoughts. He had panicked in the crisis and agreed to an over-generous deal that he soon came to regret, especially as many around him clearly thought that it showed weakness on his part. Prigozhin was looking cocky, even turning up uninvited on the fringes of an Africa summit being held in St. Petersburg. As the extent to which there

Wagner mercenaries riding an APC while running training sessions for Belarusian troops in 2023. (BelTA News Agency / Wikimedia Commons CC 3.0)

had been sympathy for him within the officer corps became evident (not just from Gen Surovikin, who was quietly detained for investigation), Putin seems to have become convinced that he needed to deal with Prigozhin in a more conclusive manner.

The last flight of RA-02795

On August 23, 2023, after a slight delay allegedly to fix a minor technical issue, the Embraer Legacy 600 business jet with the tail number RA-02795 lifted off from Moscow's Sheremetyevo airport heading for St. Petersburg. Thirty-three minutes into its flight it suddenly began to plummet, with one wing apparently blown clean off the fuselage. It slammed into the ground outside the village of Kuzhenkino in the Tver Region, killing everyone on board: three flight crew, Prigozhin, Utkin, the logistics and travel expert Chekalov, and four bodyguards. Putin made some bizarre claims that the mercenaries might have been incautiously juggling explosives, but it is hard to see a plausible alternative explanation to the general belief that he had arranged the Wagner Group's beheading.

Prigozhin became something of a martyred hero to Russia's "turbo-patriots." To avoid any mass protest, the authorities buried him in St. Petersburg's Porokhovskoye Cemetery in a private ceremony conducted behind a wall of policemen, but everything from makeshift memorials to statues have since appeared. Indeed, there is even now a whole mythology about Prigozhin's alleged survival. After the anniversary of his birthday on June 1, 2024, cemetery workers found a card on his grave warning "I'll be back," and there have been claimed sightings of him as far afield as the CAR and Thailand.

He reportedly willed Wagner, and most of the rest of his business empire, to his 25-year-old son Pavel, but there was no way the Kremlin was willing to accept this. As a consolation Pavel was given the opportunity to command a small force bearing the Wagner name that would be subordinated to the National Guard, but essentially his father's mercenary empire would be taken over by the state. "Putin's mercenaries" have certainly not died with Prigozhin; if anything, they may expand, although sometimes they are not quite what they seem.

The Expeditionary Volunteer Assault Corps

Many former Wagner contractors are now serving in the SVO in Ukraine within this opaquely named umbrella organization, alongside a range of other mercenary and quasi-mercenary units which have since emerged. One common factor is that they are all now under much tighter central control.

On the one hand, they have military value: this proliferation of units can act as an incubator for the testing of new tactics and weapons. For example, in 2024 the Borz Bn began recruiting women as snipers and drone operators, while the *Perun* load-carrying drone (capable of lifting a casualty, or a payload of up to 200kg) was first field-tested by mercenaries before being offered to the regulars.

On the other hand, Putin has learned the lesson that he can never again let a strong-willed underling build and command a private army. For example, after PMC Redut's mauling in February 2022, efforts were made to reconstitute it, but there was too much competition for recruits, so by the end of that year it was wound up as a fighting force. Instead, drawing on its powerful "brand image," it was used to attract volunteers who were then farmed out to other units.

The Expeditionary Volunteer Assault Corps (DShKE) was established in late 2023 to create a single structure to unite all the "volunteer forces" operating within the SVO theater: mercenary PMCs, so-called "volunteer battalions," and around a third of the *Boyevoi Armeyski Rezerv Strany* (BARS) mobilized reserve (see below). Crucially, the DShKE is not an operational command, but an administrative one: any maneuver units are

H

THE FUTURE

(1) African Corps instructor; Libya, 2024

The Kremlin's decision in late 2023 to create an "Africa Corps" was first and foremost a bid to retain Wagner's valued political contacts and lucrative contracts in Africa, but under tighter Russian government control. Despite the paramount need for soldiers to fight in Ukraine, a mix of veterans and adventurers are still operating across that continent. This soldier is part of a small detachment in Libya supporting Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar's Libyan National Army, the strongest of several warring forces in that failed state. He is dressed largely in army-issue hot-weather gear (albeit in a different camouflage pattern) with an "under-armor" jacket, and he carries a 9mm PP-19-01 *Vityaz* SMG. His left sleeve patch **(1a)**, while showing clear homage to the old Wagner skull-in-crosshairs, is informal; at the time of writing the African Corps is still very much a work in progress. Behind the instructor is the latest update of the tripod-mounted RPG-29 rocket grenade launcher.

(2) Chechen *Akhmat* battalion soldier; Kursk Region, August 2024

Spurred on by Wagner's success, in 2022 the Chechen Republic leader Ramzan Kadyrov founded his own PMC, named "Akhmat" after his dead father, to fight in Ukraine. Though described by Kadyrov as "elite special forces," many acquired a poor reputation among their Russian peers as "TikTok troops" – meaning that they seemed keener on posting gung-ho videos of themselves on social media than on actually doing much fighting. This man, with a characteristic Muslim beard, seems to be celebrating a success during the resistance to Ukraine's August 2024 incursion into Russia's Kursk Region, although it is not clear where this is supposed to have been achieved. He displays both a unit patch **(2a)** on his right shoulder, and a variant national flash, with a hand-painted "Z," on his right chest. Note the white recognition bands around both his left arm and right thigh. Some photos show these men with all-black tactical rigs, and another shows them with new Multicam clothing and wearing a bright yellow band around the left arm only. He is armed with a *Vepr*-12 VPO-206 12-gauge semiautomatic shotgun; patterned after the original Kalashnikov rifle, this has acquired a new role during the Ukraine war as an anti-drone weapon. It has several magazine options, of which 12 rounds seems the most usual.

(3) *Fakel* Battalion volunteer, 2024

Increasingly, the boundaries between the regular army, militias, and mercenaries are becoming blurred, as the Kremlin pressures institutions – from regional governments to major corporations – to establish at their own expense "volunteer battalions" for the war in Ukraine. Many personnel are either veterans of or younger rejects from the regular military, and / or corporate security employees pressed or encouraged to join. This veteran – identified as such by his paratrooper's striped *telnyashka* and his Afghan War Wounded Veterans' Association 10th Anniversary Medal – is a former security guard from the Gazprom "gas giant" now serving in *Fakel* ("Torch" – left shoulder patch as **3a**), one of three battalions created by that corporation in 2023. Such units often have to rely upon hand-me-downs from the army or commercially sourced equipment; however, while his uniform is non-standard, and his VSR *Kamysh* tactical vest is second-hand, his folding-stock AKS-74 rifle with GP-25 40mm under-barrel grenade launcher is well cared for (see also Plate D2, page 37, for vehicle).

АКНМАТ
СИЛА
2
2а
3
БАТАЛЬОН
ФАКЕЛ
3а
1
1а
АФРИКАНСКИЙ КОРПУС
AFRICAN CORPS

A scout-sniper from a Russian Army Reserve BARS unit takes aim with his suppressed SVD rifle during fighting around the city of Liman in the northern Donetsk Region. Most BARS battalions, while not mercenaries, are placed alongside them within the Expeditionary Volunteer Assault Corps for operations against Ukrainian forces. (Russian Ministry of Defense CC 4.0)

directly subordinated to one of the army's three Groups of Forces (North, Central, and South) in Ukraine. The aim is to continue to use mercenaries while ensuring that they work smoothly and obediently with the rest of the military. The only real question is whether the Akhmat battalions will truly be incorporated into the DShKE or whether, like other Chechen units, they remain under Kadyrov's direction.

Something of a hybrid between mercenary and regular forces, the Volunteer Battalions are units which the Kremlin has ordered to be established by local administrations, wealthy oligarchs, and commercial corporations. It is they who provide funding to offer recruits signing-on bonuses and enhanced pay, but once the units have been formed they are directly subordinated to the military high command. Moscow's Mayor Sobyanin, for example, has formed several "Sobyanin battalions"; the Roscosmos space agency has formed a PMC called *Uran* (Uranus); and the Gazprom energy corporation has raised three volunteer battalions: *Fakel* ("Torch"), *Potok* ("Flow"), and *Plamya* ("Flame").

Conversely, BARS, the Combat Army Reserve of the Country, is an enhanced reserve system introduced in 2015, whereby ex-soldiers were paid for undergoing a month of refresher training every year, with the prospect (now realized) of being called up in the event of war. Since 2022 the BARS system has been adapted to allow it to be used to establish battalion-strength units from particular regions or political movements. BARS-1 Kuban, for example, is made up of Cossack volunteers from the Kuban region, while BARS-13 Sarmat is drawn from the National Bolshevik movement. Technically these are not mercenary organizations, but they are in effect treated as such by the government, and the BARS system has been used to assimilate PMCs. For example, BARS-30 Livadia is essentially the Crimean-based PMC Convoy. This was founded in 2023 by Sergei Aksyonov, governor of Crimea, and "Mazay" Pikalov, formerly Prigozhin's Africa point-man.

The African Corps

As of 2024, there are still units calling themselves "Wagner" serving in Africa, but they are being subsumed within this new structure. In order to retain the political and economic rewards of Prigozhin's African operations, the

Kremlin decided in effect to take it over and rebrand it as the African Corps. (This AK is sometimes called by the historically resonant but inappropriate alternative "Africa Corps.") Work on this program began in late 2023, and at the time of writing it is still incomplete, given the obvious complexity of renegotiating or transfering contracts and assets.

It is clear that all Wagner PMC operations in Africa will fall under the AK, as may activities by other Russian mercenary units. It is anticipated that it may reach a strength of 20,000 contractors, some of whom – given the parallel demands of the Ukraine war – will be locally recruited, albeit under Russian officers. Deputy Defense Minister Yevkurov is its public face (one Russian military observer called him the "chairman of the board"), but operational command is the responsibility of MajGen Andrei Averyanov, head of the GU's Unit 29155 "wet work" covert-action section and a direct subordinate of Gen Alexeyev.

It is unclear whether this will actually work. One of the reasons Wagner was successful in Africa was that it fitted into Prigozhin's broader business empire, from "troll factories" to "money laundries." The GU may well be able to manage the "trigger-pullers," but does it have the level of entrepreneurial acumen that Prigozhin displayed? That would involve managing the massive illegal financial flows that allowed gold and diamonds to be turned into cash to pay mercenaries and bribe officials, all without falling foul of Western sanctions. Only time will tell; but it is already clear that the AK is able to find new markets, sending small detachments to both Burkina Faso and Niger, and also making a pitch to the Democratic Republic of Congo.

With the fall of the Assad regime in Syria in December 2024, however, much of the African Corps' future will depend on the fate of Russia's bases in that country. At the time of writing, late in December, it is unclear if Moscow will be able to retain even transit rights, let alone a base. So it may be that the fall of one regime which Wagner had propped up for so long cripples its successor PMC too.

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INDEX

Figures in **bold** refer to illustrations.

African Corps 40, **H1** (61), 62–63
aircraft **24**, **28**, **41**
Akhmat Bns **46**, 47–48, 62, **H2** (61)
al-Burhan, Col Abdel Fattah 32
Al-Shabab 38
Aleppo, siege of (2016) **25**
Alexeyev, LtGen Vladimir 19, 29, 41, 54, 63
Angola **8**

Bakhmut 45–47, **47**, 48–51, **F1** (49)
BARS (Combat Army Reserve of the Party) 62, **62**
Bednov, Alexander "Batman" 15–16, 46
Bogatov, Andrei "Brodyaga" ("Vagabond") 20, 25
Botashev, MajGen Kanamat 42–44
Burkina Faso 40

Central African Republic **31**, **32**, **C1** (33), 34–35, **34**, **35**
Chekalov, Valery "Rover" 21, 59
Concord Management Group 12, 13, 27, 29, 31, 38
Condé, Louis Joseph de Bourbon, Prince of 8
Cossacks 6–7, **6**, 8, **15**, 16, **51**
Cuban proxy military missions 8, **8**

Debaltseve, battle for (2015) 16–18
Deir-ez-Zor, siege of (2017) 28, **30**
Dyumin, Alexei 12, **12**

Espaniola Bn 41–42, **51**
Evropolis LLC 26–27, 29
Expeditionary Volunteer Assault Corps (DShKE) 60–62

Fakel Bn **H3** (61)

Gerasimov, Gen Valery 45, 50–51, **51**, 52, 57
Gondin, Carlos Fernández **8**
GU 14, 15, 16–17, 19, 29, 63
  HQ **17**

Haftar, Gen Khalifa 35, 60
helicopters **36**

ISIS/ISIL 24–25, 28
Ivan IV the Terrible, Tsar 4, 6
Ivannikov, LtGen Oleg 16–17

Jones, John Paul 7, **7**

Kadyrov, Ramzan 47–48, 60
Khasham, battle of (2018) **B4** (23), 29–30
Kuznetsov, Alexander "Ratibor" 20, 25, 32, 44

Learmonth, George (Yuri Andreyevich Lermont) 6
Libya 35–36, **H1** (61)

Mali **C3** (33), 38–40, **38**
"March of Justice" (2023) **G2** (55), **G3** (55), **56**, 57–58
memorials **51**
mines **A1** (9), **27**
Moran Security Group 10, **10**
Mozambique 36–38

Nagin, Alexei "Terek" 44, 47
neo-Nazism 12–13, 42, 46
Nuzhin, Yevgeny 45

Palmyra **B2–3** (23), 24–25, **27**
patches
  African Corps **H1a** (61)
  Akhmat **46**, **H2a** (61)
  Fakel Bn **H3a** (61)
  RPA **A3** (9)
  Rusych **E3a** (43)
  Wagner **B2a** (23), **B3a** (23), **C1a–b** (33), **F4** (49), **G1a–c** (55), **G2a** (55)
Patriot PMC 29, 34
Paul I, Tsar 8
Pavlov, Arsen "Motorola" **5**, 16
Peter the Great, Tsar 4–6
Pikalov, Col Konstantin "Mazay" 31, 34, 62
Prigozhin, Yevgeny **G1** (55), **58**
  background and character 11
  and creation of *Wagner* 12–14
  and the GU 19
  money making 25, 26–27, 28–29, 31
  mutiny and death 51–59
  and recruitment 44, 45
  and *Wagner* ops 30, 32, 35, 39, 42, 47, 50–51
Putin, Vladimir 10, 11, 50–53, **51**, 57–59

radios **B3** (23)
Redut-Antiterror PMC 29, 41, **E1** (43), 60
Rogozin, Dmitry 18
Rostov-on-Don 52–54, **53**, **54**, **G1** (55), **57**
Russian Military Police **29**
Russian Navy 22–24, **22**
Russian Orthodox Army (RPA) **A3** (9), **51**

Shoigu, Sergei 28–29, 30, 35, 45, 50–57, **51**
Shugalev, Maxim **35**
Sidorov, Yevgeny 21, 29
Slavonic Corps 10–11, 20, 21, **B1** (23)
Sparta Bn **5**, 16
Spetsnaz **11**, 18, 19, 24, 25
Sudan 32, **C2** (33)
Surovikin, ColGen Sergei 28, 51, 52–53, **52**, 59
Syria 21–30, **B** (23), **26**, 63
Syrian Tiger Forces 24

tanks 17, **54**
Timofeyevich, Yermak **6**
Touadéra, Faustin Archange **31**, 34
troll farms 11, 31
Troshev, Andrei "Sedoy" ("Greyhair") 17, 20–21, 25, 53, 58

Tsar's Wolves 18, **51**
Tsel camp **57**, 58

Ukraine
  pro-Russian militias **5**, **13**
  Russian invasion **D1** (37), **D3** (37), 41–51, **62**, **H3** (61)
  Russian takeover of Crimea and Donbas **A** (9), 11–21
  and Sudan 32
United Arab Emirates 32, 35, 36, 40
US forces 29–30
Utkin, Dmitry "Wagner" **A2** (9)
  background and character 12–13
  and creation of *Wagner* 13–14
  death 59
  and "March of Justice" 57–58
  and *Wagner* ops 16, 17, 20–21, 25

vehicles
  Bukhankas **D2** (37)
  MRAPs **16**, **35**, **D1** (37)
  other APCs **53**, **59**
  "technicals" **27**, **D3** (37), **G2** (55)
  Wagner overview 27–28
  see also tanks
Venezuela 40
Viking Bn **19**, 46
Vostok Bn **14**, 15

Wagner PMC
  contractors **A1** (9), **A2** (9), **C1** (33), **C3** (33), **E2** (43), **G** (55)
  convict recruits 44–45, 47, **F3** (49)
  creation 11–14
  funding 26–27, 28–29, 31
  and the GU 14, 15, 16–17, 19
  mutiny and end 51–59
  officers **B3** (23), **52**
  organization and expansion 19–21, **20**
  origins of name 8, 13
  recruitment 42–45, **44**
  Rusych Group **E3** (43), **45**, 46
  snipers **B2** (23), **F1–2** (49)
  trainers **C2** (33)
weapons
  antitank **C2** (33), **41**
  carbines **A2** (9), **C1** (33)
  grenade launchers **19**, **H1** (61)
  machineguns **15**, **C3** (33), **D3** (37), **53**, **H1** (61)
  pistols **A2** (9), **C2** (33)
  rifles **10**, **B1–3** (23), 27, **E3** (43), **45**, **F1** (49), **F3** (49), **G2** (55), **58**, **62**, **H3** (61)
  rocket launchers **30**, **46**, **G3** (55), **H1** (61)
  shotguns **H2** (61)
  Wagner overview 14, 42
women mercenaries 42, 60

Yelizarov, Anton "Lotos" 44, 47
Yevkurov, ColGen Yunus-bek 54, 63

Zhuravlyov, LtGen Alexander 28, 30

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Author's note:

Transliterating from Cyrillic always poses challenges. I have generally chosen to transliterate words as they are pronounced, and have also ignored the "soft" and "hard" diacritical signs found in the original.

Abbreviations used in this text:

AA	antiair
AK	*Afrikanski Korpus*, African Corps (Russian)
APC	armored personnel carrier
AT	antitank
BARS	*Boyevoi Armeyski Rezerv Strany*, Combat Army Reserve of the Country (Russian)
Bde	brigade
Bn	battalion
BTG	*Batalyonnaya Takticheskaya Gruppa*, battalion tactical group (Russian Army)
ChVK	*Chastnaya Voennaya Kompaniya*, Private Military Company (PMC, Russian)
Co	company
Div	division
DNR	*Donetskaya Narodnaya Respublika*, Donetsk People's Republic (pro-Russian separatist)
DShKE	*Dobrovolcheski Shturmovoy Korpus «Ekspeditsionny»*, Expeditionary Volunteer Assault Corps (parallel administrative structure for Russian quasi-regular forces in Ukraine from 2023)
DShRG	*Diversionno-Shturmovaya Razvedyvatelnaya Gruppa*, sabotage assault-reconnaissance group (within *Wagner*; aka "*Rusych*")
EW	electronic warfare
FSA	Free Syrian Army (Western-backed anti-Assad regime insurgent forces)
FSB	*Federalnaya Sluzhba Bezopasnosti*, internal Russian Federal Security Service (1995 title of successor agency to Soviet KGB from 1991)
GRU	*Glavnoye Razvedyvatelnoye Upravleniye*, Main Intelligence Directorate of the General Staff (Russian military intelligence – known as the GU after 2010)
GU	*Glavnoye Upravleniye* (revised title of GRU after 2010)
KGB	*Komitet Gosudarstvennoy Bezopasnosti*, internal Soviet Security Service 1954-1991
KPGVS	*Komandny Punkt Gruppirovki Voisk v Sirii*, Command Post of the Group of Forces in Syria (Russian)
LNR	*Luganskaya Narodnaya Respublika*, Lugansk People's Republic (pro-Russian separatist)
MANPADS	man-portable air-defense system
MRAP	mine-resistant, ambush-protected (vehicle)
MRL	multiple rocket launcher
PMC	Private Military Company (see ChVK)
PSC	Private Security Company
Rgt	regiment
RShR	*Razvedyvatelno-Shturmovaya Rota*, recon-assault company (subunit designation within *Wagner*)
RTG	*Rotnaya Takticheskaya Gruppa*, company tactical group (quasi-battalion designation within *Wagner*; later ShO)
SBU	*Sluzhba Bezpeky Ukrainy*, Ukrainian Security Service
SDF	Syrian Democratic Forces (US-backed, Kurdish-led militia coalition)
ShO	*Shturmovy Otryad*, assault detachment (quasi-battalion designation within *Wagner*, formerly RTG)
SVO	*Spetsnialnaya Voyennaya Operatsiya*, Special Military Operation (the Kremlin's euphemism for 2022 invasion of Ukraine)
SVR	*Sluzhba Vneshnei Radvedki*, Foreign Intelligence Service (Russian)